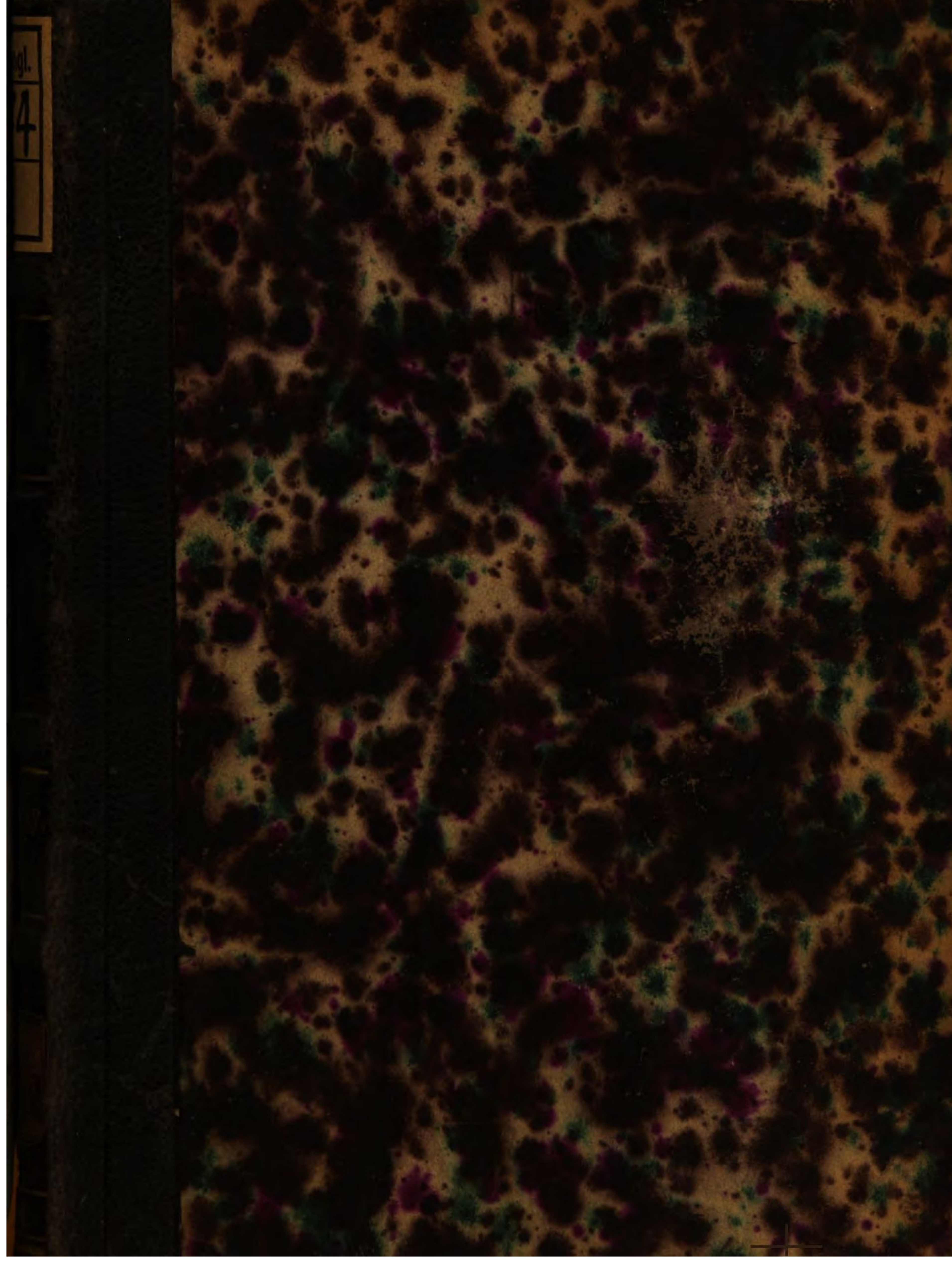




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Yates

COLLECTION
OF
BRITISH AUTHORS
TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 1229.

CASTAWAY BY EDMUND YATES.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

COLLECTION

OF

BRITISH AUTHORS

“Like some forlorn and desperate castaway.”

Tit. And.

VOL. 1539

CASTAWAY BY EDWARD YATES

BY TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I

CASTAWAY.

A NOVEL.

BY

EDMUND YATES,

AUTHOR OF

"NOBODY'S FORTUNE," "DR. WAINWRIGHT'S PATIENT," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1872.

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CAS TAWAY

NOVEL



IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL I

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1872

The Right of First Sale is hereby

TO SHIRLEY BROOKS.

JUST eighteen years ago, I read in the *Morning Chronicle* some kind words about a story in verse which I had contributed to the *Keepsake*, and which was the first composition of mine that attained the dignity of publication. Those kind words I found, on inquiry, were written by you; since then they have been followed by many kind deeds.

In very slight acknowledgment of our long friendship, I inscribe this Book to you.

EDMUND YATES.

London, January 1872.

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CASTAWAY.

PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

After Mess.

"JUST fetch my coat out of the commercial-room, Sam, and get my luggage ready for the bus—I am going by the eight-forty-five."

"Is this yours, Mr. Baines?" said the person addressed, the boots of the hotel, pointing to a number of queer-looking packages wrapped in leather, and secured with huge straps and buckles, which were lying in the passage of the George Inn at Cheeseborough.

"Yes," replied Mr. Baines; "you ought to know, you have seen them often enough."

"Well, do you know," said the boots slowly, "I daresay you may think it odd, but there is a good deal of luggage of the same pattern as is brought to this house. The fancy line ain't what it was, Mr. Baines."

"You are right, Sam," said Mr. Baines, "it's over-

done, it's— Hallo! what's that?" he cried, as a roar of laughter rang through the house. "Got a public dinner going on, Sam?"

"No, not exactly," said Sam. "Yeomanry's out, and a fine out they are making of it. There is six hundred of them in one place and another up and down the town; and there has been a review to-day, and the officers has been dining here afterwards. That was them hallooing just now."

"Yeomanry, eh!" said Mr. Baines. "I don't hold much with yeomanry, Sam; my idea is that the proper way to defend this country—"

But Mr. Baines was compelled to postpone his intention of imparting his notions for the national defence, as at that moment the omnibus drove up, and seeing in it a representative of the rival house of Peto and Wiggins, Mr. Baines hastened to climb the box with the view of learning all about the intended movements of his brother commercial.

Meanwhile the stout Major, whose jokes, principally levelled against himself, had evoked the laughter thus commented upon, had brought his speech to a humorous conclusion, and sat down amid the applause of his comrades. The disinclination for more oratory, and the desire to smoke, now impelled most of the officers to push away their chairs and adjourn to the billiard-room; no one, however, ventured to move, until the president, Lieutenant-Colonel Goole—a tall, handsome man, wearing the Crimean and Indian medals—had risen from his seat, and bidding his

brother officers good-night, and bowing right and left, had left the room.

Then all restraint was thrown off, everybody began talking to everybody else, caps and shakoes were hastily donned, and the doors being thrown open by the waiters, the crowd of young men surged into the passage, and thence into the billiard-room, while some, more highly favoured than the rest, sought the snuggerly behind the bar, and there entertained themselves with flirting with the good-looking barmaids.

Only two men remained in the room where the dinner had been held. Both were middle-aged, but one had retained his figure, and a certain unmistakable soldier-like smartness, while the other, close verging on corpulency, unbuttoned his jacket and flung himself back in his chair, with an air of one accustomed to subordinate everything to his sense of personal comfort.

His companion watched these proceedings with a certain amount of curiosity, and when they were completed said, with a laugh:

“By Jove, Jack, this’ll never do! If you go on like this you will have to pay three hundred pounds for a charger to carry you. This all comes of selling out early, and going in for domesticity and gentleman-farming.”

“Upon my word I believe you are right, Cleethorpe. I must ride close upon sixteen stone now, and it seems to me that I am putting on flesh every year. I think you are wrong about the selling out though.

I could not have stood that confounded 'stables' much longer; and as for the domesticity, I was meant to be a home bird, and not a battered old London rake like you."

"Exactly," said Captain Cleethorpe, lighting a cigar and handing his case to his friend, "exactly; the only wonder is to me that you still remain in this regiment."

"Well, you see, Cleethorpe," said his companion, slowly expelling his smoke, "there is nothing that I know of so good that you cannot have a little too much of it, and I find that to come down here to see you, my old chum of so many years' standing, and to talk with the Colonel, who is a deuced nice gentlemanly fellow and a man of the world, and to mix with these young fellows, who show me what the present generation is like, does me good by rubbing off the rust—"

He stopped as the door opened, and a young man entered the room. A man a little above the middle height, and apparently not more than eighteen years of age, with a small and singularly well-shaped head and handsome regular features. So handsome was he, with his dark blue eyes and dark chestnut hair, which curled in natural and most unusual ripples over his head, that even men, who are generally accustomed to scorn anything like personal beauty in one of their own sex, were fain to admit that he was good-looking. Artists found his lips too full, and his forehead a little too narrow, but principally admired the shape of his

head, and the way in which it was joined to his throat, which they pronounced classical and Byron-like, though they complained that the delicate tints of his complexion were too essentially feminine.

There was, however, nothing effeminate in the young man's manner. He strode into the room without swagger indeed, but with perfect manly ease, and walked up to the far end of the table where he had been sitting during dinner.

"Come to hunt for my cigar-case," he said, as he passed his two brother officers; "must have dropped it under the table. O, here it is. Not coming to the billiard-room, Captain Cleethorpe? Do come, there is great fun going on; just going to get up a pool, Captain Norman, and must have you; capital thing for you after dinner. I'll be your player, and take care you have plenty of exercise in walking after your ball."

And before either of them could reply, he had laughed and quitted the room.

"That's a cheeky youth," said Captain Norman, looking after him; "cheeky, but deuced good-looking. One of the new lot, isn't it? Which; not Travers?"

"No," said Cleethorpe. "Travers is the great hulking fellow that sat within two of you just now; this lad's name is Heriot. His father is an old army man, now a Major-general and a K.C.B., who has been out in India all his life, and has just retired from the service. Goole is an old chum of his, which accounts

for the lad being with us, though I think I understood he is going into the regulars."

"The cub is deuced good-looking," said Captain Norman, "but he'll want a good deal of licking into shape."

"I don't think that," said Captain Cleethorpe; "he is only a boy, you see, and cheeky as most boys are, but his manners are generally pretty enough. The sort of boy I think I should be proud of," said the Captain, slowly puffing at his cigar. "I wonder what Sir Geoffry will think of him? The lad hasn't seen his father, he tells me, since he was a baby."

"What was it I heard about this old Heriot?" said Captain Norman; "something, I know; a tremendous martinet, wasn't he?"

"Yes," said Cleethorpe; "when I saw him out in India he was a strict disciplinarian and a first-class soldier. Kimandine Heriot they used to call him out there, from some wonderful exploit of his in either attacking or holding—I forget which—some pass during the Sikh war. But Goole, who, as I say, knows him very well, was telling me some other things about him the other day. It appears when he was last at home he married a goodish-looking woman with money and position, and that sort of thing, and everybody thought he would go on the retired list; but he didn't. After some little time he went out to India again, leaving her behind him, and she and this boy lived together till she died, about ten years ago, and since

then he has been educated in France. That's what Goole told me."

"Devilish interesting story," said Captain Norman, who was very nearly asleep, and roused himself with a start. "Now let's go and have a pool." And he pushed aside his chair, and stretched himself as he rose.

"All right," said Captain Cleethorpe, rising at the same time; and the two officers walked off together.

CHAPTER II.

In the Billiard-room.

"NICE atmosphere this," said Captain Cleethorpe to his companion, as he opened the door of the billiard-room, and walked into a perfect vapour-bath of tobacco smoke.

"Yes," said Captain Norman, waving his hand to and fro before him, in the vain attempt to clear some of the smoke away; "rather glad I am not going home to-night—it clings about you so confoundedly, and the smell of stale smoke is the only one thing that Mrs. Norman makes a row about. She don't mind it fresh, but hates it when it is stale."

"Ah!" said Cleethorpe, "then it won't do for you ever to bring her to see me at the Bungalow; our parson's wife tells me my place smells just like the inside of a pipe, and she ought to know, for the padre can never put his sermon together on a Saturday without his meerschaum in his mouth. It's clearing off now a bit, or we are getting accustomed to it. Let us see who are here."

The billiard-room at the George was a very large one, containing two tables—one at either end, and flanked all round the wall by stout horse-hair seats. Billiards were an institution in Cheeseborough; the town had produced one of the most celebrated pro-

fessional players; and no matter what might be the season of the year, the room at the George was always well filled. The town itself was split into two political parties, hating each other with undying animosity, and keeping up their antagonism not merely at election times, or other periods of political excitement, but throughout the whole year. Each party had its headquarters; the Liberals at the George and the Conservatives at the Royal, and all banquets, balls, fancy fairs, and public meetings of any kind in which the leaders of either party were interested, took place at one or other of their respective houses.

A Liberal elector of Cheeseborough would as soon have thought of smacking his lips over a glass of senna prepared for him by Mr. Tofts, the chemist, as of whetting his appetite with sherry-and-bitters at the Royal. A Conservative, if he could have imagined himself ordering such a draught, would not have been surprised to find death in the soda-and-brandy mixed for him by the barmaid at the George. But there was no billiard-room at the Royal, and as the game of billiards was a necessity both for Conservatives and Liberals, the billiard-room at the George was looked upon as a kind of neutral ground where they might meet together in friendly union, and where any reference to politics was rigidly tabooed. As happens not unfrequently, some of the keenest local politicians were the most energetic supporters of the game, and it was to their credit that they met night after night, without ever permitting themselves even a reference to

the subjects which they discussed so acrimoniously at all other times and places.

On the evening in question the billiard-room was even more full than usual; both tables were occupied, the one with a game of pool, in which most of the officers, and some of the visitors who had been present at the officers' mess, were engaged, the other by a match keenly contested by four of the best players amongst the townspeople. All along the seats ranged round the wall were men in various lounging attitudes, watching the play, and discussing the merits of the players with perfect freedom, or talking over various occurrences of that day's review, at which most of them had been present.

"Goole's not here, I suppose?" said Norman, as they seated themselves at the upper end of the room; "at least I have not come across him yet."

"No," said Cleethorpe; "he cleared off for home at once; this sort of thing won't do for him."

"Don't he like tobacco smoke?"

"O, it isn't that a bit—like most old Indians, he's seldom without a cheroot in his mouth—but the fact is, Goole is a very strict disciplinarian, and, having passed the greater part of his life in the command of niggers and natives, he finds it difficult to understand this kind of material," said Cleethorpe, motioning with his cigar to some of the yeomanry who were standing at the farther table.

"He's like your old friend Heriot, that you were speaking of—a bit of a martinet?"

"Well, yes," said Cleethorpe. "He doesn't seem to understand that this is a quasi-volunteer service, and that these men, who give up a certain amount of their time and money—though I allow it is to them amusement—are not to be treated as mere privates in the Line. For instance, Goole would think it quite derogatory to sit in this room while men in the regiment were so far forgetting the respect due to him as to play billiards in his august presence."

"Perhaps the Major thinks so too?" said Norman; "as he has taken himself off, and you are the senior officer left to us."

"The Major has taken himself off because he has discussed one bottle of sherry and two bottles of claret, and makes it a rule never to take spirits after good wine," said Cleethorpe; "and, moreover, I do not intend my dignity as senior officer to prevent my enjoying myself. What do you say; shall we join the next pool?"

"No," said Norman lazily. "I am tired after all that bumping about this morning; besides those young fellows make such a tremendous row. Let's talk to some of these yokels."

"Well, Mr. Martin," said he, turning to a stout man in a suit of dark gray, who was sitting next him; "were you at the review to-day?"

"I were, indeed, Captain, and a main fine sight it was."

"How did you think your boy Tom looked, Martin?" asked Captain Cleethorpe. "I told you the

riding-master would make something of that seat of his."

"Well, sir," said farmer Martin, "may be 'tis right in the military fashion to hold your heels down and turn your toes out, as if you were at dancing-school, and to jolt about in your saddle like one sack of flour in a large wagon; but that wouldn't do for cross-country work, Captain; you must shorten your stirrup-leathers there."

"Ay, ay," said Cleethorpe, nodding. "By the way, didn't you say you wanted to speak to me this evening, Martin?"

"Yes, sir," said the old man, dropping his voice, and edging up confidentially towards Captain Cleethorpe. "It's about Mr. Travers, sir; that tall gentleman with the cue in his hand now."

"I see. Don't point; he's looking at you," said Cleethorpe.

"No offence, sir," said Martin. "But this Muster Travers, Tom's in his troop, sir, and he du worry Tom's life out."

"Stop, stop, Martin, I cannot hear this," said Captain Cleethorpe hurriedly; "I cannot listen to complaints of this kind, at all events at such a time, and in such a place. If you have anything to complain of, or rather if your son has anything to complain of against Mr. Travers, he must bring it forward in a proper manner before the Colonel. Did you hear that?" continued Cleethorpe, turning to his friend. "Not a very popular youth is Mr. Travers, I suspect."

"Ill-conditioned brute," said Captain Norman; "quarrelsome, cantankerous, low-bred lout; a complete specimen of what these young fellows call, in their modern slang, 'bad form.'"

"He must be a singularly bad lot," said Cleethorpe, "for he even managed to-day to have a row with the Major, which I should have thought an impossibility. Hallo! what's that?" He pointed as he spoke to the other end of the room, where a little knot of men were gathered together.

Above the hum arising round them, a thick voice was heard saying, in coarse, common tones, "Can't you stand still? Always jumping about in that infernal French fashion, like a dancing-master! That's the second time you have spoiled my stroke!"

"That's that brute Travers, by the voice," said Norman, raising himself up on his elbow, the better to look at the group. "Whom is he speaking to in that charming, gentlemanly manner?"

"I cannot see clearly, but to Heriot, I should fancy, by that graceful allusion to the boy's French bringing up. Yes, it is. I hear Heriot's shrill voice in reply, and the strong foreign accent which always crops up when he's excited."

"That Travers is just the sort of fellow who would bully and swagger where he thought he could do so unchecked."

"He had better not try on such practices with Heriot," said Cleethorpe. "That young man has, I fancy, a spirit of his own. At all events, if he takes

after his father, he would be one of the last to stand any— By Jove, they are at it again."

As he spoke, the little knot of men had formed again in the same place, and again Travers's voice was heard above the others, crying out, this time in louder and more passionate accents, "Keep back, sir, will you? You have spoiled my stroke again. That time I believe you did it on purpose."

"I didn't," in Heriot's shrill accents.

"You did."

"You're a liar!"

And immediately on the utterance of the words, there followed a dull heavy sound like a thud.

Travers had hit out, and caught Heriot on the cheek. Then with something that was more of a scream than an ordinary exclamation, Heriot was rushing in upon his adversary, when the bystanders laid hold of him, and Captain Cleethorpe rushing up, pushed his way through the crowd, and taking the lad by the arm, cried out, "Mr. Heriot, what is the meaning of all this?"

The boy, who was trembling with excitement from head to foot, stared at him vacantly for a moment, then said, incoherently, "He—I—" and then, to Cleethorpe's intense dismay, burst into a flood of passionate tears.

CHAPTER III.

Sitting in Judgment.

EVERY morning at six o'clock, the bell in the turret of the stables attached to Lacklands, the pretty villa in the neighbourhood of Cheeseborough, where Lieutenant-Colonel Goole resides, is rung for full five minutes, its shrill notes warning all those who hear it, and who are in the Colonel's employ, that for them the new day has begun, and that they may at any time expect a visit from their master.

Mr. Boulger, who lives at Valparaiso Villa, the property adjoining Lacklands, and who made his money as a shipping agent at Birkenhead, objects very strongly to this bell, as do other residents in the neighbourhood. Colonel Goole receives their protests, which are sometimes made verbally, sometimes in writing, very politely, and in reply informs them, in a gentleman-like manner, and well-chosen terms, that he finds it necessary to make some such public announcement to the people employed by him, and that as an old Indian officer, accustomed to early rising, he considers the time he has fixed upon as the very latest at which work ought to be commenced. He himself, he avers, is always out of bed an hour before that time; and he might have added, is generally on

the spot to see that the warning of the bell is not without its proper attention.

This morning, for instance, he has been through the stables, and looked over the occupant of each of his four stalls, has talked with the gardener about the coming fruit crop, and consulted the shepherd as to the chances of fine weather; and now, just as the clock is striking seven, is striding about with a spud in his hand, devising certain alterations in the little slips of garden specially set aside for the behoof of his children.

The sunlight is even now sufficiently strong to dazzle his eyes as he looks up from the ground which he has been marking out, and he is compelled to shade them with his hand before he can make out the figure of a man, mounted on horseback, slowly approaching up the valley. Colonel Goole's eyesight had stood him in good stead on many occasions in India, and is good still. "Cleethorpe," he says to himself, after his survey; "Cleethorpe, on that leggy mare which he tried to make a charger of, but which he is quite wise in keeping for a hack. What can bring him here so early this morning? He's not a man to come out merely for the sake of a ride, or for breakfast; there must be something the matter in the regiment, I expect." And without relinquishing his hold of the spud, Colonel Goole started off down the hill to meet his brother officer.

The Colonel's apprehensions were by no means set at rest by the Captain's manner or appearance.

Both, however, were practical men, unaccustomed to beat about the bush, or to attempt to mystify each other, and they came to the point at once.

"Good-morning, Cleethorpe," said the Colonel, when he was within earshot of his friend; "what brings you out here so early this morning? Something has happened, I suppose?"

"You're right, sir," said Captain Cleethorpe, returning his salute, "something has happened."

"Unpleasant?"

"Very unpleasant!"

"I thought so," said the Colonel, who had paused until his friend joined him, and who now turned round and walked by the horse's side. "Please state shortly what it is."

"A row in the billiard-room of the George, last night."

The Colonel's face darkened at these words, and he muttered, "Creditable that, by Jove! Any civilian mixed up in it?"

"No, sir; the quarrel was between Mr. Travers and Mr. Heriot."

"George Heriot!" replied the Colonel quickly; then shaking his head, "I'm sorry for that. Go on."

"Mr. Travers several times accused Mr. Heriot of unduly pressing upon him, and spoiling his stroke in the game that was being played. At length, in the most marked and offensive manner, he accused Mr. Heriot of having pushed his arm."

"Well, Cleethorpe, well?"

"I regret to say, sir, that upon this provocation Mr. Heriot gave Mr. Travers the lie, and that then Mr. Travers struck Mr. Heriot a blow."

"A blow! struck George a blow?" said the Colonel, stopping short, and looking up in horror at his friend. "By Jove, Cleethorpe, I am not a rich man, but I would have given five hundred pounds sooner than this should have happened. Who were present at this scene?"

"Many, sir; quite a crowd. Captain Norman and I, some dozen of the regiment, and several townspeople. One of the waiters and the marker were in the room, too, at the time; in fact, as you will see from the sequel, it is impossible to hush the matter up."

"Sequel! What, have you more to tell me?"

"I have, indeed, and the worst part of it."

"By Jove, Cleethorpe," said the Colonel, who had fallen into deep thought, "Lord Okehampton will be furious when he hears of this; and if there's a meeting between these young men—"

"You may spare yourself the trouble of calculating the consequences of such a result, Colonel Goole; there will be no meeting."

"No meeting; that's by your management then, Cleethorpe," said the Colonel, laying his hand on the Captain's arm; "mutual retractations and apologies, eh? Cleverly managed, my friend."

"I don't deserve your compliment, and I regret

that you have quite misapprehended the state of affairs. Mr. Travers distinctly refuses to retract anything that he has said, or to apologise for the blow given to Mr. Heriot."

"The deuce he does!" said the Colonel anxiously. "Well, then, Cleethorpe, the days of duelling are over, and rightly, too, I suppose, but—but a blow is a deuced awkward thing; George Heriot can't sit down under that; he must have him out, sir, he must have him out!"

"That course has already been suggested to Mr. Heriot," said Captain Cleethorpe; "not by me, I am too old to be mixed up in such matters, but by some gentlemen more of his own standing in the regiment; but Mr. Heriot won't fight."

"What!" cried the Colonel, so loudly and suddenly as to frighten Cleethorpe's horse; "won't fight?"

"He declines to ask Mr. Travers for satisfaction for the insult passed upon him. The young man is a favourite in the regiment, and his comrades hesitated before accepting his reply. It was pointed out to him that the insult offered to him was the grossest which could be passed upon any gentleman, and one which it was impossible for him to bear, and remain in the society of gentlemen. Mr. Heriot did not attempt to argue the point; he simply declined to send a challenge."

"But didn't he give any reason for this extraordinary conduct?"

"Not the least in the world. He said he had a

reason which satisfied himself, but which he could not explain."

"This is very bad, Cleethorpe."

"Very bad indeed, Colonel. As I have told you, I thought it better to keep clear of the affair last night; but this morning I went to the young man's room—I knew something of his father in India, as I told you—and tried to represent to him the position in which he had placed himself. It was of no use. He still refuses to take proper notice of Mr. Travers's blow."

"He must go, Cleethorpe," said the Colonel, looking up at him.

"Not a doubt of that, Colonel. The prestige of the regiment would be ruined if he were suffered to remain. Two or three men expressed that opinion to me last night, amongst them Norman, who is quiet and sensible, and by no means hot-headed. Indeed, I feel it myself."

"So do I," said Colonel Goole quietly. "You mentioned his father just now; I don't know how I shall be able to break it to Sir Geoffry, and he intended to make a soldier of the lad."

"Ah!" said Captain Cleethorpe, patting his horse's neck, "it was only last evening that I was half inclined to deplore my bachelor state, and to wish that I had a boy like his; but now I cannot be too thankful for the immense amount of anxiety and possible misery that I have been spared."

"You're right. God help poor Sir Geoffry! He

will suffer frightfully. I must write to him of course, and to Lord Okehampton; and that will be a very pleasant business for me, by the way, for it was principally on my representation that Okehampton gave the boy his commission. However, we will go in and get our breakfast now, and afterwards I will write the letters, and you shall take them in with you and dispatch them. Hard lines for Heriot—frightful hard lines for a man at the close of an honourable career to find his hopes blighted and his name slurred, and that by no fault of his own. By the way, does the young man know that he must go? He had better apply for leave until the matter can be formally arranged."

"I settled that with him this morning, and am the bearer of his application. He knows, too, that he must give up all chance of entering the army."

"How does he behave about that?"

"Very quietly, and not without a certain amount of dignity. In spite of all that has happened, there is something about the young man's manner which one could never find in a coward. If one could only know his reason for this conduct!"

"That, you say, he distinctly refuses to give?" said the Colonel.

"Most decidedly."

"Then," said the Colonel, shrugging his shoulders, "we can only act on what is brought before us."

"I suppose so," said Captain Cleethorpe, repeating the shrug, and turning his horse's head in the direc-

tion of the stables, while the Colonel moved towards the house.

Their talk at breakfast was about other matters, and when the meal was finished, they adjourned to the little study, and there, after much cogitation and many alterations, their joint labours produced the following letter:

“Cheeseborough, May 18, 1860.

“MY DEAR HERIOT,—I much regret to be compelled to announce to you some ill news, which I fear will affect you very deeply. Like most old soldiers, I am not a very good hand with the pen, but you will understand that it is not for any want of sympathy that I come at once to the point, and tell you that your son must send in his resignation of the commission which he holds in the Cheddar Yeomanry. It appears that last night he and another subaltern, a Mr. Travers, came to high words in a billiard-room in this town. Your son gave Mr. Travers the lie, and Travers retorted by a blow. I need not point out to you that after this, more especially as the affair took place in public, and in the presence of several of the townspeople, there was but one course to pursue. That course, however, Mr. Heriot, although it has been plainly pointed out to him, declines to take, and is content, as it seems, to sit down patiently under the insult that he has received. Of course, his continuance in the regiment under these circumstances is impossible, as henceforward all fellowship with his

brother officers, or respect from the men, would be at an end.

"I cannot tell you, my dear Heriot, knowing as I do your acute sense of honour, how deeply I sympathise with you under these unhappy circumstances; more especially as I am sure, if George had only done what might have been expected of him, the matter could have been easily arranged. This Mr. Travers with whom he quarrelled is an underbred bully, and from what I have heard from Captain Cleethorpe, who was present at the row, and whom I think you know, I could easily have prevented matters from going to extremities. George's refusal to notice the insult has, however, completely taken the matter out of my hands. He says he has a reason for his conduct, which is quite sufficient for himself, but declines to impart it to any of us. He is prepared to send in his resignation, and I have no option but to advise its acceptance. I write to Lord Okehampton accordingly by this post. Again assuring you of my deep regret, I am, my dear Heriot, sincerely yours,

"MARKHAM GOOLE."

"There," said Colonel Goole, folding up the letter, "this affair will either break the old man's heart, or cause him to break his son's spirit."

"Do you think so?" said Captain Cleethorpe doubtfully; "for my part, I look upon the first process as difficult, the last as impossible."

CHAPTER IV.

Sentenced.

"GLAD you have come in, Mr. Riley; the General has rung twice."

"And why didn't you answer the bell?" asked Mr. Riley, a tall, weather-beaten, gray-haired man, of soldierly appearance.

"No, I thank you," replied the butler; "when I have known him as long as you, perhaps I will, but our acquaintance is much too short at present; 'and never let me see you before lunch time,' he says to me the other day, and I made up my mind that I would act accordingly."

"The General's rather short tempered in the morning," said Riley, with a grim smile as he left the room to answer the bell, which pealed out for the third time.

"Short tempered," said the butler to the footman, who entered the pantry at the moment, bearing a tray of glasses; "short tempered! He thinks he's among the niggers still, I suppose, but he'll have to alter all that now he's come over here."

"Of course he will, Mr. Johnson," said the footman; "I don't hold with blacks, which is good enough to sweep crossings and sell tracts, but not figures enough for indoor service."

Meanwhile, Riley rapidly made his way to the library, opened the door, closed it carefully behind him, and stood upright at the attitude of attention, waiting for his master to address him. The room was empty at the moment, but through a doorway at the farther end of it came a man with quick, hasty footsteps, bearing two letters in his hand. A man above the middle height, and considerably past middle age, thin almost to gauntness, upright in his carriage, rapid and nervous in his movements. His iron-gray hair, worn without parting or division, curled in a thick crisp mass on his head. His small gray moustache shaded his thin lips, but his cheeks were whiskerless, and no beard softened the outlines of the strong and heavy jaw, which plainly indicated the owner's possession of a quality characterised by his friends as firmness, by his foes as obstinacy.

Such outward appearance had Major-General Sir Geoffry Heriot. As he entered the room, he looked somewhat vacantly at the servant, then seating himself at his writing-table, spread his letters open before him, and commenced the perusal of one of them. Riley waited until his master again looked up, when he said,

"You rang, General?"

Sir Geoffry roused in an instant.

"Three times, Riley. Where were you?"

"Gone to the stables, General, to look at the horse that came last night. It's against your orders for any of the servants to come to you in the morning, and I

thought you would like to hear news of the horse. He'll make a fine charger, General, and will carry Mr. George splendidly."

"How can you tell that?" said Sir Geoffry quickly; "you never saw Mr. George!"

"No, General, that's true," said Riley; "but—"

"You never will see him," said Sir Geoffry.

"Never see Mr. George," cried the man in astonishment; "why I thought in a month's time he was coming here?"

"Mr. George Heriot will never come here," said Sir Geoffry, looking up sternly at his servant; "more than that, there is no such person."

"No such person as your honour's son?" cried Riley, who, like most of his countrymen, when excited flavoured his sentences with a vast amount of brogue.

"I have no son, Riley."

"Is Mr. George dead?" asked the man, dropping his voice.

"He's dead to me," said Sir Geoffry, in the same tone; "do you understand?"

"That's just what I don't do," said he, looking up in despair.

"All that you have occasion to know," said Sir Geoffry Heriot coldly, "and you should not know even so much, if you had not served me faithfully so many years, is this: that the person whom I have hitherto been accustomed to think of as my son, and to whose companionship and affection I have been looking for—"

ward as the solace of my life, has done something which renders it necessary for me not merely to discard and disown him, but to forget that he ever existed."

"Your honour," said Riley, involuntarily taking a step nearer to his master, and speaking with trembling lips and outstretched hands, "to discard and disown—is it Mr. George, your son?"

"Have I any other son, that you need ask?" said Sir Geoffry, unmoved. "Understand, too, that henceforward his name will never pass my lips, and must never be mentioned by you. I am aware, Riley, that silence is one of your qualities, but have you ever spoken of my son's expected visit here to any of your new associates in the servants' hall?"

"Never, Sir Geoffry."

"Never even mentioned his existence?"

"Never, General. Mr. George's name has never crossed my lips save to your honour, since we left the regiment."

"That's right; now attend to me. I expect a visitor to-day. You will have timely notice of his approach, by seeing the carriage coming up the avenue, and you will take care to be in the way to open the hall-door. Mind that this is done by you, and none of the other servants; let them know, if they ask anything about it, that it is by my special orders. You will not ask the gentleman his name; if he gives it, you will keep it to yourself, and not even repeat it to me. You will simply announce him as a gentleman, send the carriage

to the stables, and bid the driver come round again in half an hour's time. When I ring the bell you will see the gentleman to the door, and show him out, without a word. You understand me, without a word."

"I understand, General," said the man, with his head bent down, and in a low tone of voice.

"Now go!" and Sir Geoffry pointed to the door.

"It's Mr. George," thought Riley to himself, as he went slowly down the passage; "it's Mr. George! He's coming to see his father for the last time, and not all the angels in heaven, or all the other things anywhere else, would make the General budge an inch when he has made his mind up to do even so cruel a thing as this."

When Sir Geoffry was left to himself, he took up the longer of the two letters which lay before him, and read it again attentively. As he read, the blood flushed in his bronzed cheeks, his teeth were set firmly together behind his thin lips, his eyes kindled, and at length crushing the letter in his hand, he began pacing the room with hasty strides.

"A coward!" he muttered, in short, broken sentences; "a coward, that is it, neither more nor less. To think, after all I have gone through and all I have anticipated, that I should come back to this; that flesh and blood of mine should receive a blow, and, as Goole phrases it, 'sit down patiently under the insult.' A coward, eh? Gave this other man the lie, and when he hit out, naturally enough—what else

could have been expected of him?—refused to call him out, but sits down patiently under the insult. That's the tailor's blood cropping up in that—you can never get rid of the taint; like gout it will skip one generation, but it comes out in the next; it passed by me and shows itself in him. Just like your low-bred cur, who will fly out and bark and growl, but runs away directly a stick is shaken at him. To think that he should have received a blow, and—What does Goole say?" Here he referred to the letter. "'Town-people present.' I am thankful to Providence that I did not obey my first impulse, and go up to Cheeseborough to see this lad and his regiment directly I landed. With the exception of Goole and this man—what is his name?—Cleethorpe—whom he refers to, they know nothing of me except my name, and they are not likely to remember that for long after their drill meeting is over. They were all county men, I recollect Goole telling me, and Cheddar is a long way off, and has not much communication with London, so that I am not likely to be brought across any of them. 'This reason for his refusal to fight,'" continued Sir Geoffry, again referring to the letter, "'this reason he declines to impart to anybody.' Declines to impart! What does Goole mean by writing such stuff as that to me, even if he be taken in by it himself? Reason—a man has no reason for being a coward save that he is one. And here I am, with this word 'coward' ringing out in every sentence, and knowing that it is applied to my own son!"

He stopped 'suddenly, and threw up his arms in the violence of his rage and grief, then let them drop by his side, and continued mechanically pacing to and fro with his chin resting on his breast.

After about an hour had passed away in this manner, Sir Geoffry's quick ear caught the sound of footsteps in the passage close to the door. He had only time to throw himself into a chair at the writing-table, and to assume the appearance of being engaged with his pen, when the door was opened, and Riley appeared. Close behind him Sir Geoffry saw the outline of another figure, and it required all the self-command he possessed to subdue the nervous shivering, which ran through him at the sight from head to heel.

Riley studiously averted his eyes from his master as he made the announcement: "A gentleman, Sir Geoffry!" Sir Geoffry replied, "Show him in;" but, after the first glance, did not look up from the writing in front of him until he heard the sound made by the closing door. Then he raised his head, and rose from his chair, but as his glance fell upon the young man standing before him, his thoughts leaped back over the abyss of twenty years, and a woman's face, which he had not seen during that period, but which, when he last looked at it, bore just the same strange, proud expression, rose before his fancy. He sank back in his chair again, and shut the vision out with his hand.

"Father," cried the young man, stepping forward.

In an instant Sir Geoffry was himself again.

"Son," he replied, rising to his feet, and putting forth his hand to check the young man's advance, "this is the first time we have ever interchanged these terms, and it will be the last."

"Father!" again cried the youth.

"I am Sir Geoffry Heriot, if you please, to you as well as to everybody else. Whom you are now I know, but what you may be for the future is for your own decision, and utterly without any reference to me."

The young man looked up as though doubting the evidence of his ears.

Presently he said:

"You have had a letter from me, sir?"

"I have had a letter from Colonel Goole, stating what occurred on Thursday night in a billiard-room at Cheeseborough," said Sir Geoffry.

"But from me, I ask," said the young man impetuously; "had you not a letter from me, stating that I was coming to you forthwith, and that I would explain that occurrence?"

"I had," said Sir Geoffry quietly; "but there was no occasion for you to have troubled yourself to have come on such an errand. I have no doubt Colonel Goole states the circumstances correctly; you can take his letter and judge for yourself." And he threw the letter across the table.

George Heriot took up the letter and read it through, Sir Geoffry watching him intently, muttering

as he did so, "And he can read of his own disgrace without turning a hair!"

"The facts are correctly stated, sir," said George, folding the letter, and handing it back to his father.

"Of course," said Sir Geoffry, contemptuously; "gentlemen are no more in the habit of perverting facts than of submitting tamely to insult. We will go through the statements seriatim if you please. You and this Mr. Travers," said the General, referring to the letter, "had this quarrel at a billiard-table?"

"We had."

"He accused you of obtruding on his stroke, and of purposely pushing his arm?"

"He did."

"You gave him the lie?"

"Yes."

"And he then struck you a blow?"

"He did."

"That blow you have not attempted to avenge. You remain, as it were, with a red mark of his buffet on your cheek. You have not demanded satisfaction for this insult that has been put upon you?"

"I have not."

"On the contrary, you have refused to call this man to account?"

"I have."

"And you dare, sir, to come here and confront me with such a decision as that in your mouth?" cried the General, almost shrieking with rage.

"I dare," said George Heriot, very quietly.

His son's coolness had a subduing effect upon the elder man. His look was still disdainful, and his manner imperious, but his voice was considerably moderated as he said:

"Your daring to do so proves more plainly than anything else that we have never met before, and that you have been brought up in complete ignorance of my character."

"I certainly was not brought up to regard you either as an idol whom I was to worship, or as a bully from whom I was to run away," said the young man, still very quietly.

Sir Geoffry's face darkened, and he seemed as though about to again give vent to his passion. But he checked himself, and said:

"I am indebted to those to whom your early days were confided for having failed to represent me in the last objectionable character. As to the former," he added grimly, "they were not likely to make any mistake about that. However, that is not relevant to the subject at present under discussion. You allow that all that is said by Colonel Goole in this matter is true?"

"Perfectly true."

"Then it only remains with me to announce the determination which I have come to in the matter. Stay, though. Colonel Goole tells me that you describe yourself as having some reason for refusing to demand satisfaction of this man."

"Of any man," interrupted George.

"Of any man," repeated the General. "I beg your pardon, and accept your correction in its wider sense. This reason you declined to state to Colonel Goole, or to any of your brother officers. Does your objection to mention it apply equally to me?"

"It does not."

"No! Then you can give me your reasons?"

"I can."

"And will?"

"Certainly."

"I confess I shall be curious to hear what can have been your motive for sacrificing a very promising career, almost before you had entered upon it."

"My sole motive for refusing to fight a duel—that is the right way to put it, as, even had I been challenged, I should have declined the meeting—was, that I had sworn a solemn oath never to engage in such an encounter."

Sir Geoffry laughed aloud.

"The old story," he cried, with a sneer; "the coward's never-failing plea. So tender of his word, so regardless of his honour. And to whom, pray, and under what circumstances, was this oath given?"

"To whom? To your wife: my mother."

Sir Geoffry started, and shook himself as though he had received a cut from a whip. He steadied himself quickly, and then, placing his fingers upon the table, remained standing.

"And you ask under what circumstances," continued the lad. "I will tell you. The first time I

can recollect any allusion to it was when I was quite a little child. We were living then at Saumer, a little village within a short distance of Boulogne. We used to go into Boulogne in a kind of omnibus, drawn by one horse, and driven by a man named Joseph. It used to start very early in the morning, that the countrywomen might be betimes at market with their fruit, and flowers, and vegetables. And one morning, just as we were skirting the sands, we saw a little knot of men gathered round something which they were slowly carrying away. Joseph stopped his horse, and ran to see what it was, and coming back told us that it was the body of an officer who had been just killed in a duel. That night I spoke to my mother about it, and asked her what a duel meant, and why the officer had been killed. After she had explained this, she cried a great deal, I recollect, and made me promise never to allow myself to be mixed up in such matters. The subject was never alluded to again between us until"—and here the lad's voice broke a little—"until she was dying. We had had a long, long talk, and she had told me of all that she wished me to do. I was sitting by her; her eyes were closed, and I thought she was sleeping, when she suddenly roused up, and clutching me by the arm, reminded me of the scene which we had witnessed from the Saumer omnibus, and of the promise which I then made. 'You were very young then,' she said, 'and you are but a mere child now, but you will have sense enough to understand me, and to do what I bid you,

when I tell you that it is my urgent wish, and that I am going away from you, and you will never see me again. Say after me these words: 'I swear by my hopes of salvation, and by the love I have for my mother, that I will never fight a duel, or take part in one in any way.' I repeated the words after her, then I laid down beside her, and she put her arms round my neck, and kept them there till she died."

The boy ceased. The vivid recollection of what he had described had excited him somewhat as he proceeded, and his narrative had, he imagined, had some effect upon his father, who sat with his face averted, and his head resting on his hand.

But whatever emotion Sir Geoffry might have felt, he was careful to let no sign of it escape him. After a pause he looked up, and said, in hard, dry tones:

"It is a pity you did not think of all this before you gave the lie to your brother officer, or that, having done so, you did not suffer the fact to escape your memory. The circumstances being as they are, I do not allow for a moment that your statement is a sufficient excuse for your conduct. But it has had a certain effect. When I received your Colonel's letter this morning, I determined upon disowning and discarding you on account of your conduct as described to me by him, without entering into any parley as to the past or the future. That determination I adhere to, but in consequence of what you have said, I feel it due to myself to let you know something, at least, of the history of the past. When you have heard it,

you will more readily comprehend your mother's horror of duelling, and what may perhaps have been a mystery to you—the reason that the latter portion of her life was passed away from me.

“Your grandfather was a tailor named Causton, residing in a small hamlet near London, where there was a good foundation school. To this school he sent me, his son, and there, when quite a child, I formed an intimate friendship with a lad named Heriot. This lad died when he was about eleven years old, and his father, who was a clerk high up in the India House, adopted me in his place, on condition that I should bear his name, and give myself up entirely to his direction. My father was dead at that time, and I never cared particularly about the tailor's connection, so that I gladly accepted Mr. Heriot's offer, and, under my new name, I was sent to Addiscombe, and thence into the Indian army. I stuck resolutely to my profession, never asking for leave of absence during twenty years. Then I obtained a long furlough, and came home to England. All traces of the Causton name and the tailor parentage were obliterated by this time. I was Major Heriot, well known and highly respected throughout the Indian service; and, as I had lived frugally, I had been enabled to save ample means.

“I met your mother in society, and admired her immensely. She was one of two sisters, both of whom were raved about; but your mother's was the softer beauty of the two, and in manner she was much the sweeter and more innocent. My attentions pleased

her, my position was thought an eligible one by her friends, and we were married. Within a year of our marriage, and shortly after your birth, your mother presented to me a gentleman named Yeldham, whom she had known before she made my acquaintance. He was an Englishman, but had lived most of his time abroad, had foreign manners, and was accustomed to foreign ways. He was a dilettante artist and an amateur musician, and was supposed to be particularly fascinating to women. Your mother took great delight in his society, and he was so much at our house that I spoke to her about it. She laughed at the time, and told me if I used my eyes I could see that it was her sister, who was living with us, that was in reality Mr. Yeldham's attraction. I thought no more of it, and shortly after we all went abroad, loitering up the Rhine to Baden, where Mr. Yeldham joined us. I again fancied I perceived an understanding between your mother and this man, which was anything but agreeable to me. I spoke about it in confidence to her sister, Miss Hastings, and although she strove to make me believe I was wrong, I was not satisfied with her explanation. Finally I watched their conduct at a grand fancy ball given by a French banker, who was staying at the place; and in consequence of what I saw, I sent Mr. Yeldham a challenge. Twenty-four hours after that we met at one of the small islands on the Rhine, and I shot him through the chest. With his dying breath he declared that I had been in error throughout, and that it was not even your

mother with whom I had seen him at the ball. He was a man of honour, and did his best to save a woman's reputation, but of course his statement was false."

"What did my mother say?" interrupted George.

"She corroborated Mr. Yeldham in every particular, and accused me of being a murderer," said Sir Geoffry bitterly; "and as we held such very unpleasant opinions regarding each other, I thought it best that we should separate, and I accordingly returned to India. Her horror of duelling, and the reason of my separation from her, are now, I think, sufficiently explained."

"Perfectly," said George; "but—"

"One moment," interrupted Sir Geoffry; "I have given you this explanation, which I was by no means called upon to do; and I now proceed to state to you my determination with regard to yourself. You have disgraced the name which I have raised, and for the first time that I have borne it have caused me to blush at its mention. The name is yours, and I cannot forbid your bearing it; but you shall never again be acknowledged or treated by me as my son. From this moment I discard and disown you. You are entitled, when of age, to your mother's property; I am willing to anticipate that event, and allow you to enjoy the income arising from it now, on condition that you assume another name, and pledge your word never in any way to reveal your identity, or claim relationship with me."

"I am much obliged to you, sir," said the young man, struggling to repress his emotion, "for your very

generous offer, which does you equal credit as a gentleman and as my father. I will not touch one penny of my mother's fortune until I am legally entitled to it. But, meanwhile, you need have no fear of my degrading that name by which you set such store, but which, after all, does not belong to you."

"Sir!" cried Sir Geoffry.

"Be good enough to hear me out," said George quietly. "You cannot forget that you are my father more readily than I will rid myself of every recollection that I am your son. No intrusion of mine shall ever remind you of my existence. I shall leave you to the enjoyment of the reflections which cannot fail to arise when you look back upon your estimable conduct, both as a husband and a father. But I anticipate the pleasure of seeing you once again. I shall make it the business of my life to discover the real history of Mr. Yeldham's acquaintance with my mother; and when I find, as I am certain I shall find, that you were grievously deceived by your own vanity and jealousy, I shall have the pleasure of coming and proving it to you, as some slight return for your noble conduct towards my mother and myself. And now I must trouble you to ring the bell and order the carriage to be brought round."

With this, and a slight bow, the young man turned on his heel and quitted the room.

For a moment Sir Geoffry was speechless; his rage choked him; then he said,

"What an insolent rascal! But, after all, it was better than whining; it shows he has some pluck left; and I was afraid he would whine."

END OF THE PROLOGUE.

BOOK THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

Miss Cave's Lodgings.

OUT of the bright and busy High-street of Wexeter, parallel with the narrow little court leading to the cathedral, there runs a small street of small houses, leading into an open space, and flanked on either side by a crescent. Big, heavy, old-fashioned red-brick houses, speaking of bygone times, when the gentry who have now established themselves in various country seats thought it no disgrace to dwell within the walls of the city, and when the peaceful and aristocratic quarter of South-Hedge, in which such as are left of them now reside, was by no means sufficient to contain them. At the present time, however, a different set of people is to be found in the crescent, and an eruption of brass-plates has broken out amongst its heavy railings. Doctors are there, and even dentists, agents for insurance companies, and solicitors; some of the houses in the middle of the Eastern Crescent have been transformed into a chapel, and one at the westernmost corner has only narrowly escaped being converted into a shop. The half-glazed

door with the word "office" on its window-pane has prevented this degradation; but when you have passed this Rubicon, you find yourself in a place furnished with a counter, and shelves, and other appurtenances of a shop, shoppy.

How the builders of the theatre ever ventured to select a site for that structure in such a grave and decorous neighbourhood, it is difficult to imagine; but there it is at the other end of the crescent, and, truth to tell, not very far from the chapel. A square building, with medallions of the tragic and comic muses let into its front, and with an overhanging portico, on one side of which is situated the box-office, while on the other, during the daytime at least Miss Bult, the milliner, plies her trade. Whether the situation and the surroundings have anything to do with it or not, it is impossible to say; but it is a fact, that the theatre at Wexeter always has stood high, not merely in the opinion of those engaged in it, which is of common occurrence enough, but in the estimation of those who dwelt around it, and on whose patronage it was greatly dependent. Great actors have been bred and educated on the circuit of which Wexeter was the principal town. The management of this circuit has been in one family for several generations, bequeathed from sire to son, and has always been carried on after the same regular respectable fashion. These facts were of course known to the townspeople and the neighbourhood; but no stranger, wanting to engage a seat, could possibly have walked into the box-office, with-

out being at once convinced of the respectability of the entire concern.

For in the box-office, with the box plan spread out before her, while she occupied herself either with knitting or Berlin-work, or some humbler employment for her needle, sat Miss Cave during the whole of the day, looking, with her silver-rimmed spectacles, her pepper-and-salt "front," consisting of two large flat curls over each eye, and an impossible parting in the middle, her neat cap, and her muslin kerchief crossed over her shoulders, the embodiment of respectability. There in the box-office she sat, as a guarantee for the style of entertainment for which she would sell you a seat. No one with such an appearance could have any connection with burlesques, breakdowns, or comic singing. The "Highland Fling, in character, by Miss M'Alpine;" the "One-horse Shay," by special desire, on the occasion of his benefit, by the low comedian; or a variety of singing and dancing between the pieces when the bill was short, might be looked for; otherwise Shakespeare or Sheridan, with a staid old-fashioned farce, formed the staple of the entertainment.

Miss Cave was an elderly lady—so old that none of the inhabitants of Wexeter had ever recollected her as anything else. Tradition reported that her father had been in the choir, and had been specially noticed for his fine voice by George the Third, when that old monarch and Queen Charlotte paid their visit to the city. And it is certain that Miss Cave always main-

tained amicable relations with the authorities of the cathedral, attending divine service regularly every Sunday, and never meeting canons, deans, or even the bishop himself, without receiving a pleasant greeting and a few words of salutation. Indeed, on the occasion of Miss Cave's annual benefit, a large number of the resident clergy not merely sent their families, but were themselves to be found seated in the dress-boxes of the theatre. The entertainment then provided never varied, commencing with one of Shakespeare's tragedies, concluding either with the *Critic* or the *Trip to Scarborough*. Miss M'Alpine knew that at such a time it would be useless for her to attempt to interpolate the Highland fling, and the low comedian perfectly understood that he would not be called upon to exercise his vocal powers.

Miss Cave lives in a bright little house, one of the row just beyond the theatre—a little house just high enough for its top windows to look over the old red-brick wall of the deanery garden. With Miss Cave lived her brother Samuel, who had been for years unnumbered the recognised barber and perruquier of the theatre, and the temporary attendant on such of those great actors visiting it as did not bring their own servants. It was Mr. Samuel's boast that he had "wigged and painted" more "stars" than any other man out of London; but that he was getting a little tired of it now—a statement which, considering that most of his anecdotes were personal reminiscences of the elder Kean and his compeers, might—as

regards the latter portion of it at all events — be deemed veracious.

The brother and sister occupy the parlours and the attics of the little house; the drawing-room floor is generally let as lodgings, either to the permanent members of the theatrical company, or to any distinguished artist engaged as a temporary attraction. At the present time they are occupied by a leading lady of the company, Miss Pierrepont, and her younger sister. Miss Cave has the highest opinion of Miss Pierrepont, not merely professionally, but privately. The old lady admires her lodger's appearance, voice, manner, and style of elocution, thinks she is a credit to the company, which has sent up some of the first leading ladies to the metropolis, and is only anxious lest any London theatrical manager should get a hint of the hidden treasure and come down to bear her away. But, above all, she admires Miss Pierrepont's modesty, and the propriety of her private life. Some of Miss Cave's former lodgers had been given to "gallivanting" and "carryings-on"—proceedings never explained by the old lady in other terms, but generally believed by her intimates to be in relation to the other sex, and too horrible to mention. Miss Pierrepont is given to none of these atrocities: she has very few visitors; none, indeed, beyond Mr. Dobson the manager, Mr. Potts the prompter, and young Mr. Gerald Hardinge the scene-painter. She never goes out to supper, has no anonymous letters or flowers left for her, but spends all her time in working at her

profession and finishing the education of her sister Rose.

Not that Miss Pierrepont might not have had admirers in plenty, bless you; Miss Cave knows that. Gentlemen are constantly inquiring at the box-office who she is, and where she comes from; and the admiration evoked by her powers of acting is by no means confined to applause, but forms the topic of much conversation between the acts, as Miss Cave, hidden away in the little pay-box on the top of the landing, can hear very well through the pigeon-hole in front of her, where she takes the money and gives the change. The old lady has heard, too, that when Miss Pierrepont went to the party at Mrs. Probus's—Probus was a carriage-builder and a Shakespearian enthusiast—she was made more of than any other woman in the room, which naturally accounted for her never having been asked again. But “nothing came of it,” the old lady used to say, although she had expected that, on the night after Probus's party, all the eligible young men of the town would have called at No. 9 The Precinct, prepared to lay their hands and fortunes at Miss Pierrepont's feet.

No; there was no one actually in love with her that Miss Cave could point to, unless it was Mr. Gerald Hardinge, the scene-painter, who was a mere boy, much too young for her. As the old lady remarked, she did not hold with making a great outcry about disparagement (by which she probably meant disparity) of years; but Miss Pierrepont must be at least

six years older than Mr. Hardinge; and there were temptations enough for a man in the profession, without his having a wife so much his senior. And he was a deal too handsome, Mr. Hardinge was, to be exposed to temptations of any sort more than could be helped, Miss Cave thought, "having one of those heads, my dear, which would look so well cut off just above the shoulders, and without any shirt-collar, on a medallion at the south end of the choir." He was a kind-hearted lad too, Miss Cave allowed, and generous with his money, when he had any, and gave little Rose Pierrepont lessons in drawing for nothing; and the elder sister was agreeable to him, and liked him very much, though the old lady "did not think there was anything between them."

It was a hot night, towards the end of June; the heat had been stifling and oppressive all day; and the windows of Miss Cave's lodgings were thrown wide open for the admittance of as much air as could be found. This was little enough; but such as it was it came laden with a thousand odours from the flowers in the deanery garden, rejoicing the heart of Rose Pierrepont, the sole occupant of the room, who was seated at a table, drawing by the light of a shaded lamp, and who raised her head from time to time, and glanced now at the open window, then at the closed door. As far as could be seen of her in her sitting position, a girl slight and small in figure, with a small head, delicate features, and large dark eyes. Her age was about sixteen, and she looked even younger; and

the manner in which she wore her hair, taken off her forehead, and kept back by a comb, rendered her appearance still more youthful. Her hands were thin and delicate, as was especially noticeable when from time to time she drummed them impatiently on the table before her; while the frequent expression of anxiety or irritability discomposed her otherwise handsome face.

At length she seemed as if she could bear her occupation no longer. She threw down the pencil and walked to the window. The whole sky was darkened by an enormous purple cloud, save on the horizon immediately opposite the window, where one fading streak of yellow light was reflected on the girl's face. Dazzled by this, after the darkness in which she had been sitting, the girl shaded her eyes with her hand, and, bending out of the window, looked down the street in the direction of the theatre. Instantly she drew back, and, crossing the room, resumed her seat at the table. She had hardly done so, taking up her pencil again, and becoming apparently engrossed in her work, when a light step was heard on the stairs. The door opened, and a young man entered the room. The girl looked up from her drawing in the direction of the door.

"Is that Mr. Hardinge?" she asked.

"It is," was the reply.

The man who said these words was known to the small world in which he lived (and consequently must henceforth be known in these pages) as Gerald Hard-

inge; but when the reader saw him two years ago he was called George Heriot.

In those two years a considerable change had taken place in the young man's appearance. He was darker and stouter; his figure was more set; while the growth of a light curling brown beard had rendered him much more manly-looking. He was dressed in a light gray suit of clothes, much worn, and carried a soft felt hat in his hand.

"All alone, Rose?" was the first exclamation, in a tone of disappointment.

"Yes, Mr. Gerald," said the girl quietly. "Madge is not come back from the theatre."

"The piece is over," said Hardinge. "I heard them ringing-in the orchestra for the last piece as I came away from the painting-room. What's the last piece to-night?"

"The *Warlock of the Glen*," said the girl; "and Madge don't play in the *Warlock*."

"I should think not," said Hardinge with a sneer.

"But she won't be home yet," continued Rose. "She told me she had something very particular to do, which would detain her perhaps for a couple of hours after she had finished. I was not to sit up for her if I was tired; and I was to tell you or Mr. Potts, if either of you came, that you were not to wait for her, as she would not be home till late."

"All right," said Hardinge, discontentedly enough; "her commands must be obeyed." He was moving towards the door, when, thinking he had been some-

what ungracious, he turned back to the table, and, pointing to the drawing on which the girl had been engaged, said: "At it still? What an industrious little woman it is! Let me look, Rose." And he put out his hand, as though to take it.

But Rose threw a sheet of cartridge-paper over the sketch, saying, "Not to-night, Mr. Hardinge; come to-morrow, and you shall see it."

"Right," he said; "I will come to-morrow morning, and we will have another lesson. Good-night, little one. Tell your sister I called." And he nodded and left the room.

When she heard the street-door close behind him the girl stole softly to the window, and watched his retreating figure down the street. When she could no longer distinguish it she turned sadly away.

"Was there ever any one so handsome? was there ever any one so fascinating?" she murmured to herself.

An hour afterwards, and the girl's mind was still filled with visions of Gerald Hardinge, in her dream-haunted sleep; while Gerald Hardinge himself was pacing up and down the street, with rage and jealousy at his heart.

CHAPTER II.

Before the Storm.

THE streets of Wexeter, save during the period set apart for the militia training, or other times of festivity, are left solitary and deserted at a comparatively early period of the evening. The railway omnibuses, bound for the different hotels, roll from the great central station up the High-street at stated intervals up to ten o'clock; and about that hour small parties of pleasure-seekers may be seen here and there wending their way homeward from the theatre, or from the little social gatherings where they have spent an unmistakably quiet evening. But, by that time, such places as in the day are the busiest haunts of traffic—if any region within the limits of the dull and decorous old city can be so spoken of—have relapsed into quiet, while in the precincts of the cathedral, in the still aristocratic region of South-Hedge, and in the straggling suburb of villas which has grown up thereabouts, all symptoms of life have died out at a much earlier hour, and the entire neighbourhood has long since been hushed into repose.

At half-past nine o'clock on the night when Rose Pierrepont, sitting over her drawing, was interrupted by a visit from Gerald Hardinge, a tall woman issued from the stage-door of the Wexeter Theatre, and was

suddenly confronted by Mr. Gonnop, the hall-keeper, who was smoking a long clay pipe, and patrolling the measured space of pavement outside, and to whom she wished "good-night."

"Good-night, Miss Pierrepont," responded the hall-keeper; "it looks amazing thick over there," he added, pointing with his pipe in the direction where a large black cloud was spreading over the city, "and we'll have rain before long, I reckon. Let's hope it'll come down, miss, and get all clear again before next Thursday."

"And why particularly next Thursday, Gonnop?" asked Miss Pierrepont, in a clear voice.

"Your benefit night, miss!" said the man, looking up at her in wonder; "can't have forgotten that, surely?"

"I had, indeed, for the moment; but now I remember, and thank you for your good wishes."

"Not that fine weather always does it," said Gonnop, slowly emitting his smoke and looking steadily at her, "being good for tea-gardens, and steamboat excursions, and ridiculous things of that sort, as is by their very nature contrary to theatres. For, look you, when the sun is shining—good-night," said Gonnop, bringing his sentence to a hurried conclusion as the lady moved rapidly away.

When Miss Pierrepont reached the end of the cul-de-sac in which the stage-door was situated, she turned to the right, and looking straight before her, could have seen Miss Cave's house, conspicuous by

the brightness of its knocker and the shining cleanliness of its door-step, within fifty yards. Their proximity to the theatre was indeed almost as great a reason for the popularity of Miss Cave's lodgings as their comfort and respectability; but on this occasion Miss Pierrepont had no intention of proceeding direct to her residence; but after looking carefully round to see that she was not followed or watched, she turned off at an acute angle, and quickening her footsteps speedily found herself in the aristocratic quarter of South-Hedge.

The quarter before the hour chimed out from the cathedral clock as she passed into South-Hedge, where the lights were already beginning to appear in the bedroom windows, and where her footfall was the only sound breaking the solemn silence. Past the newly-built almshouses, whose gothic proportions, which were the delight of the surrounding gentry and the fashionable local architect, stood dim, and black, and blurred against the background of thick purple cloud behind them; over the railway bridge, in the hollow beneath which the huge engines destined to the service of goods traffic, apparently undecided as to what was best for them to do, were called upon now to progress a little, now in an equal degree to retreat, and were ever and anon shrieking out their doleful lamentations at the indecision of their drivers.

Breasting the hill now, and now on the top of it in something like open country, villas scattered here and there, perched in grounds where the landscape

gardener had sought to rival the handiwork of nature, and for the most part had signally failed; a brandnew stucco church, built in imitation of a celebrated prototype in stone, but looking pale and unhealthy, of the complexion of a slack-baked, ill-toasted muffin; then, very much out of place, a squat dumpy toll-gate, the sole remnant of the pre-suburban locality, of the pre-genteel day, when, teste the weather-beaten sign-post still extant, Manor Mead was known as Dumpington, and the almshouses and the villas, and the slack-baked church, had no existence.

The turnpike-gate was closed, and no light was to be seen in the toll-house, as Miss Pierrepont, winding her way at the back of it, turned into a narrow lane which was shaded and screened by the high growing hedges on either side. Here, after a hasty glance round to assure herself that there was no one nigh, she relaxed the swiftness of her pace and threw back her veil, holding up her face to catch whatever air might have found its way into the quiet little retreat. Then she peered long and anxiously into the darkness, and turned her head towards the quarter from whence she had come, as though listening for approaching footsteps. But she heard nothing, save the first dull long rumble of distant thunder which immediately preceded the striking of the cathedral clock.

"Only just ten," she said to herself. "I am here before my time then as usual, and, as usual, he will be after his. What could have brought him down here, I wonder, now? Not that I need wonder, when

I know well enough that the want of money, and the idea that I can be of use to him in some scheme for raising it, are the only things now which induce Philip to break off, for ever so short a time, from the life which exercises such a fascination over him, and to come to me."

She listened again, but after a minute resumed her pacing to and fro.

"I wonder if he ever thinks for a minute how and where it will all end? Whether, in the easy-going current of his life, the idea ever comes across him of the position I occupy, not merely by his tacit consent, but by his express desire? If he ever does think of it, he must be a very different man from the Philip Vane of two years ago, to allow it to continue, or to bear it calmly. Why, then the mere notion would— What a fool I am to trouble myself with such memories! Whatever may be the change in him, it cannot be greater than it is with me; and all I have to do is to accept the present state of things, and to make the best of it. This must be he at last!"

She turned swiftly round, as she caught sight of a man's figure coming round by the toll-house. The next minute a tall man joined her, and after a hasty glance around, put his arms round her, and bending down kissed her cheek.

"You need not have looked, Philip, to make sure that we were unobserved," she said, with a short laugh. "There was no one near to see you take the unwarrantable liberty of kissing your wife! You are

generally prudent enough to select as our place of meeting some spot where there would be no chance of interruption."

As he heard these words, and marked the tone in which they were spoken, a dark savage look crossed the man's face. It was gone in an instant, and his big black eyes were laughing merrily and his white teeth were gleaming brightly between his smiling lips, as he said:

"Savage to-night, old lady! Upset, eh, Madge? Don't like to be kept cooling her pretty heels in this particularly cut-throat-looking lane waiting for me, is that it?" And once again he placed his arms about her and kissed her cheek.

"No," she said, "that isn't it particularly. I don't know that I am savage, and I do know that I am accustomed to wait my lord's convenience."

"Well, there, don't say any more about it," the man said, in a sharper tone. "I could not get away before, and that's enough. You got my telegram all right?"

"Of course, or I should not be here."

"How confoundedly sharp you are to-night, Madge; down upon every word I say! Nothing gone wrong, has there? How's the booking for the benefit?"

"Very good, indeed; the house will be more than full, I think."

"That's right, the money will just come in handy. I made rather a mess of it at Taunton yesterday."

"Have there been races at Taunton?"

"Yes, of course; that's why I came on to see you. Shouldn't have been in the neighbourhood for some time to come, and therefore thought I had better take advantage of the chance."

"Then it was really to see me that you came this time, Philip?" said the girl, nestling towards him, and looking up into his face.

"Of course it was, my dear!" he replied. "What did you think it was—not business? There is no information to be got, no money to be made out of you?"

"Isn't there?" she said quietly; "I thought there was."

"You know what I mean," he said. "By the way, don't forget to send me that benefit money as soon as you get hold of it. You could send it to the club, you know. What do you think the figure is likely to be?"

"The figure?"

"Yes, the amount, the sum total. Heavens on earth, Madge, how slow you are!"

"Yes," said the girl quietly; "I am thoroughly provincial; you see I have not had the chance recently of having my wits sharpened, by contact with the clever people in London! You want to know the sum to be realised by the benefit? I should say forty-two or forty-three pounds."

Philip Vane gave a low whistle.

"That's a very mild amount," he said. "I was looking for something much higher than that! By

George, Madge, this will never do! Three pounds a-week, and a benefit producing under fifty pounds; those are starvation prices! I must take you up to London. I suppose you would do there, though it's a confounded pity you can't sing and dance!"

"Yes," said the girl bitterly, "those are qualifications, the absence of which, in his wife, every man ought to regret."

He looked up at her under his eyebrows, but it was too dark for him to catch the expression of her face. There was, however, no mistaking the sneer conveyed in the tone of her voice. It was the second time during their short interview that she had thus offended him.

"What ails you to-night?" he said. "What do you mean by sneering and gibing at me in this manner?"

"What do I mean!" she cried. "I will tell you plainly what I mean—I mean that I am sick of the manner in which you treat me! You think that I am dull and stupid, but I am neither so stupid nor so dull that I cannot see plainly enough the value you put upon me, without the necessity for your insulting me by explaining it in words. I am your wife, which means your drudge, your bread-winner. Be it so; I don't repine, I did not expect to be made a fine lady of, or to live in idleness after you married me; but I did expect that you would be content with me and my talents, such as they were, and would not com-

plain while I worked my hardest, even if my earnings might be small."

She paused and stood confronting him, her head erect, her hands nervously clasped together beneath her cloak.

"Have you anything more to say?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes," she continued. "I want to know when there is to be an end to this deception? When you intend to acknowledge me openly as your wife, and take me out of my present position, which is inexpressibly painful to me, and, mark my words, infinitely perilous to you? I do not want rest, or ease, or luxury. I did not expect what most women are led to expect, that they are to look to their husbands for support: God knows, I am willing to work, and not merely willing, but delighted. I do not know that I should be happy without my work, but I want you to give me my position as your wife, and to be content with what I earn in that position."

As she ceased speaking, the low rumble of the thunder, this time much nearer, was again audible. There was a pause for a moment as its last faint mutterings died away, then Philip Vane said:

"You're right, Madge, in what you say, and I was a brute to grumble, knowing how hard and how cheerfully you work. And you are right, too, about your position. It is hard lines for you to have to come out here to meet me on such a night as this is going

to be; to have to tramp all along the road after playing—”

“It is not that, Philip,” interrupted the girl. “I don’t mind that. I don’t mind the hardship; all I hate is the deceit, the having to hide the fact of our marriage even from Rose, the having to nod and smile at the kindly prophecies of the old landlady at the lodgings as to my future, the having to receive attentions from honourable men, which would be naturally gratifying to an unmarried girl, which are degrading to me as your wife.”

“Yes,” said Philip Vane, “I understand all that, of course, and as soon as I can I will put it right. I cannot do it just now, but I hope in a few months to make that all square. By the way, Madge, talking about attentions, what about the scene-painter—is he still here?”

“Yes, he is still with the company.”

“And still as spoony as ever?”

“I don’t know about being ‘spoony;’ I think he is very fond of me, but he’s a mere boy, you know, and—”

“Yes, I know! And have you still got that notion that you told me about his being a swell?”

“I have no doubt that he is a gentleman by position and education; beyond that I know nothing.”

“Exactly; that’s quite enough! I shouldn’t discourage his spooniness if I were you, Madge; something may turn up out of it. Don’t you fear my being jealous. I can trust you, old woman; and if this man

ever came into any money, or was received back by his friends, from whom you seem to suppose he has run away, we may make something out of him. He's written you some letters, I suppose?"

Madge hesitated for a moment.

"Yes, some," she said.

"Ah! I don't want to see them, bless you," cried Philip Vane; "I can trust you perfectly, only I think you had better keep them, not tear them up or destroy them in any way; they may be useful one of these days. By Jove! here it comes," he cried, as, after a few thick drops, a heavy peal of thunder broke right above their heads. "We had better make a bolt of it at once. I've got a cab waiting the other side of the turnpike, and can set you down where you like. Don't be afraid, Madge; the driver doesn't know me, and I'll take care he doesn't recognise you."

The storm was sharp while it lasted, but was soon over. Miss Cave, who had sat up for her lodger and "gone round the house," as was her wont no matter how late the hour, after every one else had retired to rest, knocked at Miss Pierrepont's door to inform her that the clouds had quite cleared away, and that the moon was shining brightly.

"A good omen for Thursday, my dear," added the old lady, as she retired to bed.

"I hope so," said Madge to herself; "I hope so, for then Philip will get this money that he says he wants. O, my God!" cried the girl, as she seated herself on the edge of the bed, "how rapidly the

romance is dying out of my life! Never has he spoken so plainly as to-night, never striven so little to disguise himself! The money, and the money, and the money! To take what I can earn down here, to wish that I could earn more in London, to bid me gull the boy and lead him on, and take care that I keep his letters, of which something might be made? All this Philip did not scruple to do, and then he pats my cheek and tells me 'he trusts me'!"

About the same time Philip Vane, the sole occupant of the smoking-room at the Half Moon, was moodily puffing out the last fragment of his cigar.

"Forty pounds," he muttered to himself, "and I looked for at least seventy. Rode as rusty as a nail when I said I wished she could sing, and was cantankerous about everything! Worrying about her 'position,' too. I thought I had settled that question, but to-night she chose to revive it. I shall have to put my foot down upon one or two of these things, and upon Miss Madge herself if she doesn't mind."

So saying, Philip Vane threw the stump of his cigar into the empty fireplace, and strode off to bed.

CHAPTER III.

Juliet.

MR. PHILIP VANE was up early the next morning, intending to go off to town by the first express train, which left Wexeter soon after nine. He always travelled in first-class carriages and by express trains; always went to first-class hotels, asked for the best rooms, and lived on the most luxurious fare. He was one of those self-indulgent scoundrels who always found it necessary to make an excuse for the manner in which they pet and pamper themselves. Mr. Philip Vane had a stock of these excuses, which he had used so long and so frequently, that he actually began to believe in them. Thus, in regard to his travelling, he was in the habit of saying that time was money, that it was important for him to waste as little as possible of the day upon the road, and that, travelling by express, he was enabled to transact business up to the last minute at the town which he was leaving, and to be ready to commence afresh the instant he arrived at his destination. Also, in regard to his selection of the best hotels and his luxurious habits generally, he would remark that, as he depended entirely upon his own exertions for his income, it was necessary that he should keep himself in good condition, and obviate

as far as possible the ill effects of the constant mental strain, by attention to his bodily comforts.

Listening to this style of conversation, one would have imagined that Mr. Vane was a professional man in large practice, a busy merchant, or a gentleman holding in his own hands the control of several large estates; instead of being, as he was, a very common sharper, living on his wits. On those very rare occasions, when he permitted any of his more intimate associates to think that he was taking them into his confidence, he would speak of himself as "a kind of modern Ishmael, sir; a sort of fellow whose hand has been against every man, and who, consequently, has had every man's hand against him; but who has managed to get on tolerably notwithstanding."

Those assertions, like most others emanating from the same source, were wholly and entirely false. Mr. Philip Vane's hand, instead of having been raised against every man, had generally passed its time in patting the shoulder, or gently insinuating itself under the arm of every man from whom he thought he could reap the smallest benefit. All things to all men was Mr. Philip Vane: specious, sly, frank, cunning, outspoken, reticent, just as suited the occasion. This hazy comparison of himself with Ishmael arose from the fact, that he had never enjoyed the advantage of parental rearing. His earliest recollections were of the preparatory school in the suburbs of London, where, smallest among the small denizens of that little world—too small even to be placed in the lowest

class—he roamed about the house and garden, and learned his alphabet from some elder pupil inclined to gratify his dignity by teaching him. There he remained for some years, until old enough to be removed to a grammar-school. Previous to this removal, he, for the first time, experienced that greatest of all delights of a school-boy, the charm of “going home.”

Home, as realised by little Vane, was a large house in a fashionable square in Brighton, belonging, as the child understood, to his uncle, his father's brother, a leading physician of the place. Doctor Vane Philip remembered as a quiet little man, with white hair and a thoughtful face, who used to pat the boy's head, and surreptitiously give him half-crowns—surreptitiously, that is to say, as far as concerned Mrs. Vane, a full-blown handsome woman, whom Philip always remembered with flowers in her cap, and a very fresh complexion. From the first, Philip had a dim childish notion that the doctor was afraid of Mrs. Vane, whom, as the child learned in the course of time, he had married when a widow, and who had two sons, one with very large whiskers, and the other with a black-and-white dog. When the child came back for the next holidays, he learned that the dog-owning son had gone to Spain, which was a long way off, as he understood, to fight for something or somebody not clearly defined; but the other son with the whiskers was still there, and took Philip up to his bedroom, which was at the top of the house, and made him very sick by insisting upon

his smoking a pipe—a proceeding which seemed fraught with great delight to the whiskered gentleman. When Philip came home six months afterwards, at Christmas, he found the house in sad tribulation, for the son with the dog was dead, and the son with the whiskers had gone to Australia, not, as the boy gathered from the talk among the servants and the visitors to the house, without having distinguished himself by squandering a vast amount of money and running very deeply into debt. The Doctor, Philip noticed, was thinner, whiter, and more thoughtful than ever; and though Mrs. Vane wore as many flowers in her cap, she seemed to have dropped suddenly into an old woman, and shed her teeth, as he had heard of deer shedding their horns, while her fresh complexion was, he noticed, muddled and streaky.

The boy never saw his uncle alive again; he was sent home from school to attend the funeral, and formed one of a very small procession which, in the roaring wind and drifting rain, struggled up one of the back streets of the town to the little Evangelical chapel, at which, at his wife's command, the kindly old Doctor had given regular attendance, and in the burying-ground attached to which his remains were laid. After the ceremony, the little funeral party broke up, the well-known yellow carriage of the physician who had paid the last respects to his old friend stood at the churchyard-gate, ready to bear him off on his round of visits; an old school-friend of the deceased, who had come down from town, jumped into a cab

to catch the return train; and Philip and the lawyer got into the mourning-coach to return together. On their way back, the lawyer told the boy that Mrs. Vane was not well enough to see him, but that he was to go back to school that evening as soon as he had had his dinner; then, to Philip's great wonderment, asked him whether he had read *Robinson Crusoe* and *Philip Quarll*, and whether he did not think he should like to be a great traveller like those heroes. The meaning of these questions was explained a few days afterwards, when the schoolmaster called him into the apartment which was alternately a reception-room and a torture-chamber; and instead of, as the boy expected, bidding him prepare for immediate punishment, told him that he was to leave school the next day for Plymouth, where his passage had been taken in one of the steamers immediately starting for the West-Indies, he having been bound apprentice to a cousin of Mrs. Vane's, who was a merchant and planter in the island of St. Vincent.

Philip Vane went to Plymouth, and to the West Indies, but not to St. Vincent. Indeed, he carefully avoided that island, having, while on board the royal mail steamer Shannon, made the acquaintance of several young gentlemen who were going out to join her Majesty's land forces, then quartered at Jamaica; and by whose aid the lad, quick at games of skill, and lucky at games of chance, turned the fifty pounds with which he had been presented by Mrs. Vane's agent on sailing into a sum worth four times the

original amount. For two or three years he remained in the colonies, enjoying the hospitality invariably extended there to every one who makes himself agreeable, living at the different messes, riding races for the officers, staying with the merchants at their up-country villas, and providing himself with pocket-money by bold and lucky card-playing. By the time that the desire to return to his native country became too strong to be denied, Mr. Philip Vane had mixed so much with the military, and was so thoroughly conversant with their manners and customs, that, on his arrival in England, he deemed it expedient to announce himself as Captain Vane. It was as Captain Vane, ostensibly fly-fishing for his amusement at Chepstow, but in reality hiding from the officers of the sheriff of Monmouth, acting in conjunction with their brother-officers of Middlesex, that he made the acquaintance of Miss Pierrepont, who at the time was acting in that ancient town. His intentions towards that young lady were at first strictly dishonourable; but finding that she was not to be won by anything short of the marriage ceremony, and believing that he saw in the development of her talent the foundation of a future income for himself, he honoured her by making her his wife. Captains becoming somewhat common, he gave himself a kind of billiard-room brevet, and appeared as Major Vane, under which title he was favourably known in a shady fifth-rate little club, composed of adventurers like himself, and their victims, calling itself by the high-sounding name of

the Craven, and locating itself in a dingy little street in the neighbourhood of Piccadilly; had his presence "remarked" by the reporters of sporting newspapers as a regular attendant at the principal turf-meetings, and led that odd sort of flashy, swindling, disreputable existence which has so many votaries in the present day. Though two years had passed since his marriage, he had never introduced his wife to any one, and had insisted upon her keeping their connection secret, even from the little sister who was her sole relative. From time to time he appeared at places where she was acting, as he had just appeared at Wexeter, giving her the benefit of his society sometimes for a longer, sometimes for a shorter period, but invariably insisting, whether present or not, on receiving two-thirds of the salary which she earned by her exertions, and leaving her and her sister to subsist on the remainder.

Had the salary thus earned been tolerably large, it is not improbable that Major Vane's conjugal attentions might have been greater than they actually were; but the Major confessed to himself that his matrimonial speculation, as a speculation, had been a failure. In confidential communication with himself, the Major did not scruple to own that he had not much regard for his wife. Even when he perpetrated marriage, it was from the commercial aspect that he regarded the step; and from that point of view it had been a decided failure. It ought to have turned out right; he himself could check off a score of instances in which worthy gentlemen, friends of his own, were deriving

large sums from the theatrical earnings of ladies who were their acknowledged or unacknowledged partners; but these ladies were spirited persons, with little clothing and less grammar, whose portraits were in the photographers' windows, and whose Christian names, affectionately diminished, were in the mouths of London generally.

More than once he had suggested to his wife that an equally glorious career lay before her if she only chose to embrace the opportunity and accept an engagement which, without his connection with her being at all known, he could procure for her; but she invariably shook her head and refused, remaining at Wexeter, or some such dreary place, "doing her spouting," as he pleasantly but ironically called it, for a salary of three pounds a week and a benefit, which did not realise more than forty pounds.

Major Vane, however, was a philosopher. His marriage had been a mistake; he owned it to himself, but to no one else. And by the time that he had descended to the coffee-room to breakfast on the morning after the meeting in the lane behind the turnpike, he had thoroughly determined on ridding himself of the connection at the first available opportunity. Meantime, he should receive the money for the benefit and the two-thirds of the week's salary; and when an opportunity offered itself, he should grasp it, and Miss Pierrepont would hear of him no more.

While the omnibus containing this large-souled gentleman was moving towards the railway station, Miss Pierrepont emerged from her lodging and made the best of her way towards the theatre. It was very early for a rehearsal, even at such an unconventional theatre as that of Wexeter; but with a view to see whether she could not make some effect in other than merely "spouting" parts, and thus please her husband, Miss Pierrepont had determined on playing for her benefit the part of Phœbe in *Paul Pry*, one of those waiting-maids known only to the stage, who carry their hands in the pockets of their little black silk aprons, who are the chosen recipients of their young mistresses' secrets, and the terror of the lives of the elderly gentlemen, their masters. Phœbe has songs to sing, and the leader of the band, who, like every other person in the theatre, would have done anything for Miss Pierrepont, was coming early to try them over with her. Phœbe has a certain amount of interchange of repartee with the principal character; and the low comedian, whose notion of repartee consisted in making faces at the gallery, and whose "dry humour," so often lauded, resolved itself into forgetting his part, and substituting the slang sayings of the day, was coming to "go through their scenes." After that there was a full rehearsal of *Romeo and Juliet*, which was to be the leading piece on the benefit evening; so that it was tolerably late in the day before Miss Pierrepont's work was over.

Just as she was moving toward the stage-door,

she felt her arm touched, and a low voice said in her ear:

“Won’t you speak to me?”

Turning round she saw Gerald Hardinge; he was dressed in his working garb, a loose canvas jacket and trousers, spotted here and there with great daubs of paint.

“Mr. Hardinge!” she cried, putting out her hand.

“No,” he said, drawing back, “I cannot shake hands with you now; I have been at work and have not had time to wash the traces of it off. I looked down from the ‘flies’ and saw you were going away, so hurried down to stop you, as I have something to say to you.”

“I am very glad you did; I was sorry to have missed you last night—”

“Yes,” interrupted the young man, “but we cannot talk here in this passage with the wind blowing in, and old Gonnop listening to every word. Come down on to the stage, there is no one there now, and we can have it all to ourselves.”

She turned back, and passing through the littered mass of disused scenery stacked up against the walls, they went down on to the stage, now but very partially illumined by a faint gleam of light, coming through the window at the back of the distant gallery. For a minute neither of them spoke, then Miss Pierrepont said:

“What has kept you at work so late to-day, Mr.

Hardinge? I have heard of no new piece in preparation."

"No," he said, "there is nothing new, only I think it would be a disgrace to the theatre if we put on that worn and ragged old pair of flats for the garden scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, and I persuaded old Potts to let me touch it up afresh."

"Was it only for the credit of the theatre that you did that?" asked Madge, looking softly at him.

"Well, no, perhaps not," he said. "I daresay I should not have done it if it had been Miss Delamere's benefit, or if Miss Montmorency had been playing Juliet. You know well enough why I did it."

"You are a kind, good boy, Gerald," said Miss Pierrepont, softly laying her hand on his arm, "and never mind giving up your time, or taking trouble for me."

"Kind, good boy, am I?" said he petulantly; "it is very little I am able to do, but even that don't meet with much return."

"Gerald!" said Miss Pierrepont, "what do you mean?"

"Where were you last night?" asked he, turning suddenly on her; "where did you go to after you had finished here?"

"You have not the slightest right to ask me that question, Mr. Hardinge," said Miss Pierrepont, drawing herself up and looking straight at him, "and certainly not to ask it in that tone."

"I know I have no right," interrupted Gerald.

"But as I have no reason to be ashamed of what I did," continued Miss Pierrepont, without heeding him, "I do not mind telling you that I went to meet a person on important private business of my own."

"And you did not get back until nearly midnight," said Gerald.

"How do you know that?"

"How do I know it? Because I saw you return. I walked up and down the street in front of your door, from the time Rose told me you were out, until I saw you safe once more within the house."

"What, were you there during all that terrible storm?" asked Miss Pierrepont.

"Yes, I was. I did not mind that; there was far too great a storm going on within my breast for me to pay much attention to the thunder and lightning; I thought perhaps you had gone to meet some man, and I was nearly mad."

"My poor boy," said Madge soothingly.

"O, Madge, Madge! if you only knew what I suffer through jealousy; all this morning I have been like a lunatic, looking down on to the stage, and seeing that old Boodle make love to you at rehearsal."

"But Mr. Boodle plays Romeo, Gerald!"

"Yes, I know all about that; of course he must do it; and he is fifty years old, and wears a wig and false teeth, but still I hate to see him or any one else come near you, or touch you."

"But why are you so jealous, Gerald?"

"Why? Because I love you. You know it, Madge,

you know this, you are certain of it, and yet you ask me why I am jealous."

"Yes, Gerald," she said in a low voice, her hand again falling softly on his arm, "I think you are fond of me; you have shown that you are, indeed, more than once."

"No, I have not!" he burst out; "I have no chance or opportunity of doing so! I only want to prove to you how much I love you! I hate the life you are leading, and I want to take you away from it—I hate to see you stared at by a lot of senseless gabies, who think they are patronising you by clapping their hands and thumping their infernal umbrellas. I hate to see these brutes of officers—we shall have them all here on Thursday night, I suppose—haw-hawing about the passages, and talking of you in their idiotic manner. I want to take you out of all this, I want to marry you and make you mine, and mine alone!"

"To marry me!" she said with a very sad smile. "You forget, Gerald, that I am six years older than you, and that I shall be an old woman—"

"I knew you would say that! I hate it! You shouldn't say that," he broke out impetuously. "How many hundreds of men are there who have married women older than themselves, and lived perfectly happy lives! You make yourself older than you are by the hard work you do. I want to work for you, to slave for you, to make money that you may share it, to make a name that you may be proud of me; and I will do it yet. I am not always going to remain

a drudge in a country theatre. I shall get the chance some day; and then, O, Madge, how proud I shall be of you as my wife?"

"You are a foolish boy," she said, bending her deep hazel eyes full upon him, "and must not talk to me in this way."

"No," he said, curling his lip and shrugging his shoulders; "such talk is idle now, I know; I know I have nothing to offer now. If I ever had the chance of attaining a position, I would ask you to marry me; for then the knowledge that I was fighting for you would nerve me in the struggle; and you would not say No to me then, would you, Madge?"

"You shall ask me when the chance arrives, Gerald," said the girl in a low tone, "and I will answer you then."

"That time may be nearer than you imagine," said the young man. "Now, you have had a long day, and will have to begin again shortly. Let me see you to your home."

It was Miss Pierrepont's custom to lie down on her bed for an hour every afternoon before proceeding to the theatre, and thus prepare herself for the exertions of the evening. Visitors were refused admittance; perfect quiet reigned throughout the house; and Rose Pierrepont sat in the drawing-room with the door open, ready to rush out and scare away any chance irruption of cackling poultry, barking dogs, or grinding organ-men. On this day, however, though the house

was as quiet and Rose as vigilant as ever, Madge Pierrepont could not sleep. She lay outside the bed, her long brown hair unloosed, hastily combed off her face and floating over her shoulders, her head resting on her hand, and an odd wild gleam in her brown eyes.

"How wonderful," she said to herself, "how wonderful that Gerald should choose to-day, of all days in the year, to say what he just said to me! I knew that he was fond of me, of course; I could not help knowing it; but he had never spoken so plainly as he did just now. What a contrast between what I heard last night and what I heard to-day! Philip grumbling at me for not making more money; grumbling at the sum—little enough, but hardly earned—which I am able to send to him; dissatisfied because I have none of those accomplishments which, as he seems to think, alone go down with a London audience. And then this boy, hating the mere fact of my being compelled to appear in public; writhing under the notion that my name is bandied about in men's mouths, and that I am a subject of discussion, however complimentary; anxious only to give me rest, and quite contented, as he says, to slave for me, and desirous only of fame that I may share it with him. And Philip tells me he "trusts me," and bids me dally with the boy's affection, and see how much money can be made out of him. To that baseness I will not stoop! I will put an end to this nonsense altogether; I will no longer listen to— And yet how wonderfully soft and tender

his manner is! Heaven knows my life is hard enough—a grinding servitude, with only this one gleam of affection to light it up. And that I will not deny myself. No; the chance that Gerald talks of will never come. He will weary of me as Philip has wearied. Meanwhile, until he does weary of me, I will not deprive myself of his society—no, nor of his worship—the only sunshine in my life.”

CHAPTER IV.

Friends in Council.

THE income which Major Vane derived from his sporting transactions being of a fluctuating character, and the sum regularly transmitted to him by his wife being, as he justly considered, contemptible in amount, that gallant officer was unable to have his permanent home as luxurious, or even as comfortable, as he undeniably wished it to be. Though accustomed to speak of his abode vaguely and generally as his "rooms," the Major in reality occupied only one apartment, which was situated at the top of a house, the ground floor of which was a shop of such enormous dimensions, that it not merely absorbed the first and the second floors, but so bulged out at the side as only to leave space for a private door so narrow that it looked like one plank, and for a staircase which was perfectly ladderlike in the slimness of its proportions. In the fanlight above the narrow door—so narrow as to consist only of one pane of glass—and immediately above the small speck of blue gas that was allowed to issue from the one tiny burner, was pasted in the off season a fly-blown skimpy little bill, inscribed with a legend, setting forth that apartments were to be let "for club gentlemen."

In the off season only; for during the season the

"club gentlemen" mustered so strongly as to render the announcement quite unnecessary. Of various kinds were they, and so numerous, that one wondered where they could find space sufficient to stow themselves away. Blue-faced majors of the Bagstock breed, with pendulous cheeks and double-breasted coats and buckskin gloves, occasionally took up their quarters in the "apartments for club gentlemen," which also afforded shelter to an Irish M.P., who was popularly supposed to live upon the produce of the sale of blue-books and printed parliamentary documents for waste paper, and whose tall hat was so extremely shiny as to cause the parliamentary funny man—like most parliamentary funny men, but a poor joker—to say that O'Dwyer must have forgotten to take his hat off one morning when he greased his hair. There, too, for three weeks, in the very height of the season, sleeping for about two hours out of the twenty-four, was to be found a provincial newspaper reporter, who spent all the money and health which he had gained during the previous eleven months in rushing about from theatre to concert, from dance to drum, from artist's studio to author's library, chatting, note-taking, observing, and gathering together an amount of anecdote and chitchat, upon the distinction due to the purveyor of which he lived, a courted guest, on his return to his native town.

In the midst of this motley colony Major Vane was the sole regular tenant. The bed-room which he inhabited, though at the top of the house, was larger,

airier, and better furnished than the rest, and he kept it on throughout the year; because, though he was often absent for weeks together, going from race-meeting to race-meeting, or staying in the country-houses of trainers and jockeys, with certain of whom he was a great favourite, he was always liable to be summoned to London, where he made it a point of having a *pied-à-terre*. There was a certain recklessness of tone about the whole affair which amused him. He laughed at the open note, written in a round hand by the landlady, and skewered on to the extinguisher of the Irish member's candlestick, informing that distinguished politician that the cabman who brought him from the House on the previous wet night had called twice, and would take out a summons unless the money was left for him in the morning. He grinned as he inspected the highly-scented notes, addressed in violet ink and very scrawly writing, which awaited the return of the blue-faced major. He laughed as he stumbled over the enormous high-lows of the provincial newspaper reporter. He did not mind the smell of warm mutton fat, tempered by tobacco, which lingered on the staircase. He did not mind the normal state of blackness in which lived the female slave of the establishment, who printed off impressions of her fingers and thumbs on everything which she could possibly clutch hold of. He would have objected to her very strongly, indeed, and to the black-beetles, in whose company she lived, and which, when dead, were in the habit of dropping out of her costume as

she moved along; and to her cooking—an art which, judging from the result, she seemed generally to practise contemporaneously with the performance of her toilet and the arrangement of her hair. He would have objected to all this, had he had anything to do with it. But the fact was, that Major Vane only slept at his lodgings, and ate, drank, wrote, read, played cards, received visits, and gave his address at his club.

The Craven, to which Major Vane belonged, may best be described as a shady club. It was situated on the shady side of the way, in a shady street, in the neighbourhood of Piccadilly, and the members were all more or less shady, generally more. There were shady majors, and colonels, and captains, some of whom had been in the regular service, which they had quitted in a remarkably shady manner, but most of whom were accredited by or attached to Indian nawabs, or foreign potentates of the shadowiest as well as the shadiest order. There were shady barristers, whose names were recollected in connection with the shadiest cases, and shady attorneys who employed them. Such members of the Craven Club as had well-known names, were for the most part the worst of all. Whenever one of those names was mentioned, the question arose, "What have I heard about that man?" and the reflection was generally certain to bring something forward to the discredit of the gentleman in question.

One noticeable feature of the Craven Club, too, was that though most of its members were seen a great deal in public, driving handsome horses in the park,

lounging out of pit-boxes at the opera, and sprawling in stalls at theatres, always expensively dressed in exaggeration of the reigning fashion—no one ever met them in general society. They gave each other elaborate banquets at the club, they were seen during the season at Richmond and Greenwich, entertaining ladies, quietly dressed, and not indecorous in manner, who were equally unknown to the rest of the London world. Sometimes they would make an attempt to assert themselves. The men would get themselves proposed for some established and well-known club, when they would be either black-balled or withdrawn. The women would call upon some ladies whose husbands had been introduced to them; the visit would not be returned, and any further attempt at intercourse with the outer world would for a time be abandoned.

Not that they would be discouraged at these rebuffs. They ignored them as far as possible, and when compelled to accept them, they would shrug their shoulders, and talk of themselves as Bohemians; though between their debased and sensuous lives and the honest, free Bohemianism of literature and art, there was as much resemblance as between their purple whiskers and painted faces and the black locks and bronzed cheeks of the real Romany.

In its external life, at least, the Craven had some resemblance to other clubs; men ate and drank there, and there was a writing-room (the blotting-cases of which, if they could have revealed the secrets confided to them, would have been invaluable to Messrs.

Moss and Moss, the attorneys of Thavies-inn, or Serjeant Skinner, the well-known leader in the Divorce Court), and a smoking-room, where many curious little "plants" had been concocted, and a card-room and a billiard-room. The wines and spirits supplied to the members were undeniably good; Dick Wrangham, commonly known as Ringlet Wrangham, took care of that, for after he had sold out of the cavalry and failed as a horse-dealer, some of his friends set him up as the proprietor of the Craven, and out of its profits he earned a very tolerable income.

About noon on the second day after his return from Wexeter, Major Vane entered the club, and ordered his breakfast. In the coffee-room he found several other members engaged in discussing the same meal; breakfast, however, at the Craven Club, was by no means of the ordinary kind. On the tables was seldom to be seen any tea or coffee, or their usual accompaniments; there was toast, certainly, but it was prepared with anchovy; there were devilled biscuits and cayenned legs of poultry, and artful thirst-provoking preparations of dried fish; and for the allaying of the thirst when provoked, there were cool cups, which on the whole were found to inebriate considerably more than they cheered, and effervescing liquors of all kinds.

Noon was the very earliest period of the day recognised at the Craven Club; the number of members did not admit of more than one staff of servants being kept, and as the habits of its frequenters were un-

doubtedly late, much alacrity before noon could not be expected of the waiters who had not retired to rest before daybreak. Very filmy-eyed and cloudy-linened were these domestics in the morning, as they yawned in the bay-windows and swept up the fragments of cigar-ash with dirty dusters, and plunged their fingers into flat remains of half-emptied tumblers. The grim old porter, who had an easier time than most of them, as he slept soundly during the latter part of the night in his glazed box, always had a hoar frost of silver beard upon his mottled cheeks, and cursed, and envied while he cursed, the bright freshness of the boy who slapped the newspapers down on the desk before him and laughed in his face. The man who brought the play-bills knew something about sitting up late, and the woman who left the milk knew something about getting up early; but in regard to the number of hours' sleep they had, one might be regarded as Rip Van Winkle, and the other as the Sleeping Beauty, in comparison to this hall-porter. By noon, however all the establishment was on the alert; the members who lived in lodgings wanted their breakfasts, and the members who lived at home, and who for various reasons did not care to have their correspondence addressed to their private houses, wanted their letters. There was generally great anxiety to see the sporting papers, several copies of which were taken in at the Craven, and there were hazy reminiscences of last night's conversation to adjust, and half-made, half-dreamt-of wagers to regulate and settle.

All the men at breakfast looked up as Philip Vane swaggered to the waiter's desk to give his orders, and two or three of them growled out "Good-morning." He was a popular man in the club, and had it been dinner time, would have been received with a chorus of acclamation, but the members of the Craven were generally short-tempered and reticent in the morning, and thought a nod quite sufficient greeting. Major Vane returned the salutations in his usual careless, insolent way, seated himself at his table, and buried himself in the folds of a sporting newspaper. From the vaticinations of the writer, whose principal merit appeared to be the ingenious manner in which he refrained from mentioning the name of the horse whose merits he was discussing, alluding to it now as the son of its sire, now as the native of the place where it was bred, and now as the property of the person who owned it, Major Vane's attention was distracted by the simultaneous arrival of his breakfast and of a friend.

There were some points of similarity and dissimilarity between them; the breakfast was sound and good, the friend was neither; the breakfast had to be paid for, so generally had the friend. There was a doubt as to whether the breakfast might disagree with one, there was no doubt about the friend's disagreeing with one, if by so doing he saw a chance of bettering his position. Delabole was the friend's name, his status that of gentleman, though twenty years before, when he spent a few happy days with Lieutenant Bird, the

governor of Alnwick gaol, his name was Munker, his profession horse coping. But Alnwick was a long way off, and Lieutenant Bird had been dead for many years.

A short fat man, Mr. Delabole, with a square head like a tin loaf, no neck to speak of, an enormous chest, always set off by a very open shirt-front, or covered by a waterfall of satin, with one valuable pin in its centre; short awkward legs, and very small hands and feet. The latter, which were flat as well as small, always looked like the feet of the dummies in the tailors' shops; the little fingers of the former were always covered to the knuckles with lustrous rings. Philip Vane saw the rings blazing on his shoulder before he looked round at their owner. Mr. Delabole always put his hands on his friends' shoulders and generally called them "dear boy." He was a large-hearted man, very.

"We wanted you with us last night, dear boy," were Mr. Delabole's first words after the interchange of greetings.

"And I wanted you here," said Philip Vane.

There was something in his look which aroused Delabole's attention, for he said quickly:

"Why, has anything been done?"

"Not much. Bolckoff brought his cousin here, the man from Germany, about whom he is always swaggering."

"I know."

"Well, I played écarté with him."

"Well!"

"We played five games, of which he won three."

"Ah! that means nothing, dear boy!" said Mr. Delabole, drawing up his chair, and dropping his voice. "You were playing—"

"Foxey!" said Vane in a whisper; "so was he, foxey to the teeth and eyes, foxey all over! Vine grower at Neuwied, Bolckoff called him, and thought I believed it! No Rhenish grape merchant ever handled his cards like that Viennese, my dear Delabole! As keen a Viennese sharp as ever swaggered in the Prater, or played at the Verein."

Philip Vane's eyes flashed, and his voice grew a little louder as he finished this sentence. Mr. Delabole held up a warning finger, and when he spoke there was no trace of emotion in his tone.

"It is very, very likely, dear boy!" he said, in a fat whisper; "it's just one of Bolckoff's moves! Your Polish Jew, sir," continued Mr. Delabole, shaking his head sententiously, "your Polish Jew is a bad breed!" Then, in quite a different tone, he added, "What did you want me for, dear boy?"

"Merely to know whether I was right as to our friend's style; merely to see whether you agreed with my idea of it."

"No occasion for my presence for that; trust my Philip for the spot-stroke in such a case! For finding needles very judiciously hidden in bottles of hay, there is not, I believe, your equal."

"You must want something of me very badly in-

deed, Delabole," said Vane grimly. "I never heard you so complimentary. Has it anything to do with last night, of which you were speaking?"

"It had nothing to do with anything in the world, dear boy," said Delabole, "certainly not with anything of last night, which was devoted to pleasure, and in which no trace of business intruded."

"Pleasure!" repeated Philip Vane.

"Pleasure, and nothing else," said Delabole. "A delightful little supper given to Lotty Lopez, and a few of her female friends."

"Ah!" said Philip Vane shortly.

"And why 'ah!' dear boy?"

"I don't go in for that sort of thing."

"Perhaps not," said Mr. Delabole, in his airiest manner; "but because you are virtuous, are there to be no more cakes and ale? It was really a very pleasant little gathering, not the less so from the touch of romance attending the circumstances."

"Romance?" echoed Philip Vane, with a laugh. "What was there romantic about it? Was the landlord so fascinated by Miss Lotty's beaux yeux, that he declined to take any money for the bill, or was the brilliancy so contagious that one of the waiters exhibited a talent which he had hitherto hidden under a napkin?"

"Neither, dear boy," said Mr. Delabole quietly; "nor was any one rude—as you are just now! Rudeness isn't clever, dear boy, and as a general rule doesn't pay. No! the little spice of romance was de-

rivable from the fact that it was a farewell banquet to Lotty, who, with her little troupe, has been engaged by Wuff on a travelling tour for three years, and quits these shores for America next week."

"What a blow for England!" said Philip Vane; "how she will sigh over her departing children!"

"There are others of her children," said Mr. Dela-bole, "who may some day be called upon to depart from her shores, under different circumstances, and whom she will not regard so much! As for myself, little Lotty always amused me, and I am sorry she is going; I could have better spared a better woman. That's a quotation, I believe, but, oddly enough, it's true."

"If you are so fond of her, why don't you go with her?" said Vane.

"Because it wouldn't suit me, dear boy; because there is no opening for me; because—I don't want to, in point of fact. But, for the matter of that, why don't you? Wuff's at his wits' end for a leading man and leading woman. Let me write him a line, and say I have found the first in you?"

A sudden thought struck Philip Vane.

"Hold on a minute and drop chaffing. Does he really want a leading actress to go out with this lot with him? Not a dancing, capering wench, I mean, but a woman who can act?"

"He does want one most infernally."

"What will he give?"

"Well, our friend Wuff isn't in the open-handed,

melting, charity line, but I should think he would stand six pounds a week, and travelling expenses. He gives Lotty ten, I know, but then—”

“I’ll find him the person he wants,” said Philip Vane quickly.

“You, dear boy?” said Delabole, surprised. “I thought you said just now you were not in that line?”

“Nor am I, but when I was down in the West the other day, I saw a girl—Miss Pierrepont, I think she was called—”

“Pierrepont!” said Delabole. “Yes, I’ve heard of her in the provinces. Good, isn’t she?”

“So far as I understand these matters, very good,” said Vane; “a friend of mine is interested in her.”

“Ah, ah,” said Delabole, “we know what that means.”

Vane knew, too, what Delabole’s tone meant; knew that it was his wife thus alluded to, but took no notice.

“I mean,” he continued, “he should be glad to see her position improved, and this is an opportunity which I think would suit her.”

“I would, if I were you, dear boy,” said Delabole, looking at him straight in the face, “I would just put on my friend’s hat and my friend’s coat, put my friend into the train, and get him to discuss the matter with Miss Pierrepont.”

“You think that’s devilish funny,” said Major

Vane, returning his stare, "but you're wrong for once. The woman is nothing to me, only I thought it might suit her, and do your friend a good turn at the same time."

"All right, dear boy," said Mr. Delabole. "I will let Wuff know. If it comes off, she must start next week."

"I have heard," said Mr. Delabole to himself, as he climbed into the mail-phaeton which was waiting for him at the door, "I have heard Philip tell a great many lies cleverly, but never so cleverly as that one he told just now. His face was a perfect study of candour. Pierrepont? I'll make a little memorandum of this conversation when I get into the city."

When Philip Vane had finished his breakfast, he went into the writing-room, and wrote this letter to his wife:

"Thursday.

"You need not send up the benefit money to-morrow, I will come down and fetch it. Meet me in the same place at the same time to-morrow; I have something very important to say to you."

CHAPTER V.

A Meeting by Moonlight.

MISS PIERREPOINT'S benefit was even a greater success than her warmest and most sanguine friends had anticipated. The dramatic critic of the *Wexeter Flying Post* remarked the next day that "such a galaxy of beauty and fashion had never before been gathered together in our little temple of Thespis."

And he was almost justified in his statement. The clerical party was fully represented. The bishop was away in London; but the dean was there, rosy and bland, following the text of the tragedy in a large quarto volume, which he had brought with him, beating time to the delivery of Mercutio's speech about Queen Mab as though he had been conducting an oratorio, and benignly deaf to the profane remarks with which the representative of Colonel Hardy in *Paul Pry* thought fit to season the author's dialogue. Emboldened by their august leader's presence and evident delight, the other pillars of the church gradually relaxed from the extreme state of severity into which they had thought fit to settle themselves on their entrance, while the female members of their families sighed over Juliet's woes, and tittered at Phœbe's impudence, in unrestrained freedom. Be sure that Probus, the coachmaker and Shakesperian enthu-

siast, was in the front-row with his family, looking as if he knew all about the tragedy, and wagging his head as one who should say, "I am pleased to see the delight it affords you, my friends, but I have been steeped in it for many years." Gerald Hardinge was right in his anticipation of the presence of the military. The officers were there in force, from the colonel to the youngest subaltern, and being one and all in severe evening dress, gave quite an aristocratic appearance to that portion of the dress-circle which they filled. So Sam Cave said, at least, and Sam Cave ought to have known, having twice attended the performances of Madame Malibran in London, and being the only person within many miles who was supposed to know what Fop's Alley was, or what it meant.

The good townspeople, too, most of whom had heard from Miss Cave of her lodger's quiet life, and of the way in which she supported her younger sister, made a point of attending in crowds, and of cheering the heroine of the evening to the echo. These cheers she really deserved, as, always conscientious and painstaking, she had never so thoroughly identified herself with any character, never so sunk her own individuality in the part to be assumed, as on this occasion. The extra excitement and fatigue, indeed, had so far prostrated her, that at the conclusion of the performance, Miss Cave, who had been checking the accounts in the front of the house, ran round to the stage-door, and seeing Gerald Hardinge in waiting on Miss Pierrepont, bade him take her home at once,

leave her at the door, and not attempt to talk to her that night, and the worthy soul added to Madge, "You will not see me, my dear, until to-morrow morning, or hear anything from me about it; though I can tell you that owing to Sam's having packed them together like herrings, we have got more money than I can ever recollect into the house, and the result will be better than I told you; I will come up to your room the first thing to-morrow morning with the amount. And now, Mr. Hardinge, take her off directly."

The next morning, when Miss Pierrepont awoke, she found that the kind old lady had already been to her room, for lying on her pillow was a small white-paper parcel containing the items of the account jotted down in Miss Cave's neat, though now tremulous handwriting, and more than forty-eight pounds in notes, gold, and silver.

Forty-eight pounds! Madge counted it over two or three times and was delighted, for that was considerably more than she had led Philip to expect. How pleased he will be! Perhaps he will be able to spare her a little of it; she would like to make old Miss Cave a present, and some acknowledgment to two or three others, who had put themselves to extra trouble and inconvenience on her account, and who could little spare the time they had given up. Rose, too, wanted a new gown sadly; Madge knew the girl was ashamed of her dress, though she never complained. But she had refused to go out walking very often lately, except in the evening dusk, and Madge

was sure that was the reason. As Madge was in the midst of this wonderment, there came a knock at the door, and Miss Cave entered the room.

"That's a good girl," said the old lady, looking not without admiration at the pretty figure before her, with its long brown hair floating over its shoulders; "I thought you would not be foolish enough to get up just yet after all your fatigue, so I have brought you a letter which has just been left by the postman. There it is," she continued, laying it on the bed, "a letter with the London postmark and a smart seal; I only hope it is not from any London manager, who has heard of you and wants to offer you an engagement. Perhaps it's from Mr. Boscawen. I sent him one of your circulars, but I heard afterwards he had gone to London."

"No," said Madge, "it isn't from a manager, and it isn't from Mr. Boscawen. It is not a very important communication. How very good of you, dear Miss Cave, to take so much trouble about me, and to get me all this money!" She looked up and tried to smile, but the light had died out of her eyes, and her lips trembled.

"No thanks at all, my dear," said the old lady; "it was your own talent and niceness that drew the money, and all I had to do was to collect it, and make it up for you. Now, if you don't want to sleep any more, I will make you a nice cup of tea, and bring it up to you before you dress,"

So soon as she was left alone, Madge took up the letter and read it again.

"What can it mean?" she said to herself. "Philip knows I would send him the money at once and safely. I have done so before; it cannot be for that, then, that he is coming! There must be something important that brings him here so soon again! It's overfatigue only, I suppose, but I am horribly low and down this morning, and feel as if something evil were going to happen."

All day long the same wonder beset her. What could it be? And the apparent importance of it grew as she thought it over.

One thing was certain, she must meet him that night. There would be a difficulty, but that must be overcome. Gerald Hardinge would want to see her of course. Now and then, once a week, perhaps, he was in the habit of coming in when he had seen her home from the theatre, and partaking of their frugal supper with her sister and herself, a small but pleasant meal, to which, on such occasions, he always insisted on contributing.

He would want to come that night doubtless. There were numerous incidents of the benefit to be talked over; she had scarcely seen him since, and he would doubtless propose himself as a visitor that night. It could not be. She must go and meet Philip, that was imperative; she must devise some story which would satisfy Gerald, and in order to do that, Rose must be taken into her confidence.

That last necessity was very unpleasant to Madge Pierrepont. In the course of her career, straight as she endeavoured to keep it, she had to undergo various little shifts and privations, to pass through various phases of life, not necessarily base or ignoble in themselves, but rendered so by their connections and surroundings. But all these were with scrupulous care hidden from the knowledge of her younger sister. Madge Pierrepont was not unacquainted with the mysteries of the pawnbroker's shop; she had had experience of the hard bargains driven by the tallyman for clothes which were absolutely necessary to her in her profession, and of the extortions of the usurer—not unfrequently some other member of the company—for salary lent to her in advance.

But Rose knew nothing of all these things. She was but a child, Madge said, and it was desirable that she should be kept as long as possible in ignorance of all the bad ways of this weary work-a-day world. She had her French lessons to do, with her music, and then there was her painting, in which she took such interest, and in which Gerald Hardinge so kindly helped her. Let her go on with this until the time came when she must struggle for herself; but until that time came, let the meanness and the shifts of hard-grinding poverty be kept from her.

Now, however, she must be taken into confidence, so far at least as to throw dust in the eyes of Gerald Hardinge and Miss Cave, both of whom would be curious as to Madge's proceedings. Madge recognised

this, and thought out her plan of action while she dressed herself, and when she crossed over into her little sitting-room, she was perfectly prepared with it.

Rose was delighted to see Madge, and ran up and kissed her, and congratulated her on the success of the benefit. Rose had never seen Madge look so gloriously, or play so splendidly, as she had done on the 'previous night; and Miss Cave had told her that Madge had made a lot of money; and that was good hearing; for they wanted it badly enough, goodness knows. "Just look at my rags," said Rose in parenthesis, holding up her arm, and showing where the poor cheap stuff had undeniably frayed away. And Madge must be awfully tired, mustn't she—good thing she only played in the first piece that evening—and she must come home directly after and go to bed, and the next day there was no rehearsal, and she could take a long rest, and they could talk over all that was to be done.

There was Madge's chance. She replied affectionately and sweetly to all her sister's congratulations, and then she added, "I was very tired, dear, but I have had a good long sleep, and I cannot come home early to-night, as you suggest, because I have to go out for an hour or two on a matter of business."

Rose's face flushed instantly. "Going out, Madge, what again? You were out—when was it?—Monday night, the night of the storm. How very strange!"

"And I shall be out again and again, or I shall

remain at home here without moving out at all, just whenever it suits my purpose, however strange you may think it, my dear Rose," said Madge quietly.

"Well, but—"

"Be good enough to attend to me; I have business which calls me out to-night. It is probable that when Gerald Hardinge does not find me in the theatre, he will come on here."

"O, then your business does not concern Gerald Hardinge?"

"My business concerns myself—and you—and no one else." And Madge's cheek burned as she uttered the lie.

"O, I only thought — What then?" said Rose inconsequently, but much less acrimoniously than before.

"Well, if Gerald comes on here, you must tell him that I have gone to bed thoroughly tired out, but I will see him in the morning."

"O, Madge! but suppose he sees Miss Cave?"

"If Miss Cave comes home before Gerald arrives, you must tell her the same story; if she comes after him, you will tell her that I have gone to Mrs. Probus's, who wanted especially to see me, and that I shall not be late."

"But, Madge, won't it—"

"Do as I tell you, Rose, and don't ask any questions! Depend upon it that what I am going to do is both for your interest and mine."

And Rose, who took a very different view of the

affair when she found that Mr. Gerald Hardinge was not mixed up with her sister's proceedings, promised compliance, and said no more.

It was dull work that night at the theatre; *Romeo and Juliet* was played again, "in consequence of its enormous attraction;" but no one who had been present on the previous night would have recognised the performance. Reaction was evident everywhere, even down to the two "supers," and Mrs. Gonnop, who played the Nurse. The house was not one-third full, and those persons who were present seemed bored and dissatisfied. The curtain was no sooner down than Madge Pierrepont ran to her dressing-room, threw a large cloak over her stage-dress, dashed some water over her face, twisted up her hair, put on her bonnet, and sallied forth. She saw nothing of either Miss Cave or Gerald Hardinge, but turned rapidly into the street, and along the road up which we have before tracked her footsteps.

A very different night from that on which she last went this expedition. Now all was bright and clear, the moon riding high in the blue sky, and every object in the landscape standing out square and closely defined against her light. Mellowed and softened by her rays, the Dumpington-turnpike threw a shadow, strange, foreign, and kiosk-like, over the road into the little lane, the moonbeams penetrated through interlacing trees, working a wavy arabesque pattern on the green hedgerows, and chequering the winding path with light and shade.

This time Madge was not the first to arrive. As she turned into the lane, a figure arose from the bank, against which it had been lying, and advanced to meet her. It was her husband.

"You're late," was his genial greeting.

"I came away as soon as I could, Philip," she replied; "didn't even stop to change my dress—look here." And she opened her cloak, showing Juliet's white robe underneath.

"By Jove," he said, glancing at her, "there's purity! What is it, a Druidical priestess, or a virgin of the sun?"

She flushed angrily for a moment, but recovered herself directly, then said with a short laugh, "You would rather it were Iago's doublet, I suppose, and that I could not merely give you his counsel, "put money in thy purse," but act upon the advice. However, I can do that as it happens without the doublet. This is for you," and she placed a small packet in his hand.

"What is this?" he exclaimed, as he took it. "O yes, the benefit, I forgot all about it! How much is there here?"

"Forty-eight pounds, Philip," she cried, laying her hand upon his shoulder, and looking up into his face. "Isn't it good?"

"Might have been worse," he said, quietly slipping the money into his pocket. "Well, and how did it go off, and all that sort of thing?"

"I scarcely know what you mean by all that sort

of thing," said Madge; "the house was very full, as you will know by the contents of your waistcoat-pocket."

"Yes, but you? Did you tip 'em the word in grand style? Did you let 'em have it from the shoulder?"

"I spoke the text of the part, so that I conclude that I did tip them the word. I don't understand your delicate allusion to the shoulder."

"There, don't be cross, Madge," said Philip Vane putting his arm round her; "I know I am always talking slang, but that's the fault of the people I live with; I've no doubt you acted splendidly and got plenty of applause."

"Old Mr. Probus wrote me a note this morning, declaring he had never seen Juliet better played, and he recollects Miss O'Neil."

"Dear old Probus," said Philip Vane. "What will he take to drink? Seriously though, I am delighted to hear it. Well, and what have you got to say to me?"

"I thought it was to say something to me that you came down here," said Madge; "for my part I have not got much to say. O yes, Philip, one thing I want you to do, if you can, to spare me a little of that money."

"O," said Major Vane, "a little of that money, eh?"

"A very little will do, Philip: there are two or three things that I absolutely must have in my theatrical

wardrobe, and poor Rose has scarcely a gown to her back."

"It seems to me a devilish hard thing that we should have to provide poor Rose's gowns out of our income," said the Major; "however, of course, she can't be allowed to disgrace the family. Let me see," he added, taking the packet from his pocket. "What did you say the figure was?"

"Forty-eight pounds," said Madge.

"Forty-eight. Five, ten, fifteen, ah, very neatly made up, forty-five in notes and three in gold. Well, Madge, I will see if I can spare you the three pounds, though I must confess that just now it is deuced inconvenient."

Madge took the three sovereigns without a word. The devils of passion and wounded pride were struggling within her, and she dare not trust herself to open her lips.

"And, by the way," continued Philip Vane, "it was upon the very subject of money that I have come down to talk to you. You know all this applause and all these compliments from old Potbus, or whatever his name is, are very well in their way, but there is nothing substantial about them. The only way to appreciate a thing is by its money value, and the salary you are earning just now is an uncommonly small one."

"When you say 'appreciate a thing,' you mean appreciate me by my money value, I suppose," said Madge, "and that to you is small. You must permit

me to say, however, that you knew what it was when you condescended to accept it; and that it has not deteriorated since."

"Yes," said Philip Vane impatiently, "all right! Just come off the high ropes, will you, and let's talk this thing through quietly, and in a business-like way. Our interests are the same, or ought to be."

"Yes," said Madge bitterly, "'or ought to be'!"

"Now, if I were not the best-tempered man in the world, you really would put me out by your interruption! Our interests are the same, and what is good for you is good for me. Now I have an idea, which, if I can only carry it out, will improve both your position and our interests."

"Not by my going to London, Philip; not by my attempting to play in burlesque, and sing songs. O, for goodness' sake, don't ask me to do it! It would not be of the smallest use either; I should make a dead flat failure of it, and lose the little fame I have gained in my present humble way."

"My good girl, I am not going to do anything of the sort. I would not dream of inflicting upon you such a degradation! On the contrary, what I have to propose entirely arises from the fact that you are what you are, a leading actress, and not one of those jiggling jades."

"Do you mean to say you have heard of an opening for me in my own line in London, Philip?" cried Madge eagerly.

"Well, no, not in London exactly," said Major Vane.

"Liverpool or Manchester?" she asked.

"No, wrong again; a little farther off. The fact is, that Mr. Wuff, whose name I daresay you have heard, a man who has been mixed up in theatrical matters for the last hundred years, I believe, has been organising a troupe to go out under his supervision to America, Australia, and other places of that kind, on a three years' tour. He has made his arrangements with the best ballet people and that sort of thing, and he wants some one for a star actress, and I have come down to propose that you should go."

Madge had been listening open-eyed and open-mouthed. When he ceased, she was silent for a moment; then her first words were, "But what of Rose?"

"O, damn it," cried Major Vane, "must she go too?"

"She must, of course. How could I leave her, with whom could I leave her? Of course she must go!"

"Well," said Major Vane, after a moment's reflection, "I daresay that could be managed." Wuff will make her play pages' parts, or turn her into something useful, he thought to himself.

"Three years," said Madge reflectively; "it's a long time to be away. Do you think you could manage to live without seeing London, and London acquaintances, and London ways, for three years, Philip?"

"No," said that gentleman candidly, "I am certain I could not."

"But you will have to, if we accept this offer?" said Madge.

"Eh?" cried Major Vane, in a loud and startled tone; "you don't imagine that I am going away to play a leading lady too, do you?"

"Do you mean to say that you are not going, Philip?"

"I have not the remotest intention of doing anything of the sort; my business engagements here, my good girl, would prevent me."

"O," said Madge quietly, "your proposition, then, relates to me alone?"

"Exactly!"

"You don't expect me to give you an answer here, and at once, I suppose?"

"Well, I did, as I rather want to get back to London."

"It is impossible! It is a matter which will take serious reflection. If you are so pressed you had better go; I will write to you my decision."

"No," said Philip Vane promptly, "that won't do; you must make up your mind, please, within the next twelve hours," looking at his watch. "It is now eleven o'clock; at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning I will be here again, and you will be good enough to meet me. Consider it thoroughly, and don't act upon impulse; your reply may have a greater influence on

your future than you are at present aware of. Now, good-night."

He did not offer to embrace her; he did not even approach her; but kissed the tips of his fingers airily, and walked off.

Madge, standing in exactly the same position, heard the rumble of the departing wheels of the cab which, as before, he had left at the bottom of the lane; then, with sad face and rebellious heart, she made the best of her way towards what she called her home.

CHAPTER VI.

A Meeting by Daylight.

WHEN Madge Pierrepont arrived at her lodgings, she found the door open, and Miss Cave looking down the street.

"At last, my dear," said the old lady; "I thought you were never coming; I have got the fidgets upon me to-night, and have been up two or three times to look out for you; and when I heard your footstep coming round the crescent—I would know it in a thousand—I thought I would wait, and get a little fresh air until you came up. Now in with you and get to bed at once; what with last night and all, you must be dog-tired."

"And I am very tired, Miss Cave," said Madge, with a faint smile.

"Tired, my dear; I have no patience with that old Probus keeping you up to this hour. Was he pleased with what you did last night?"

"Very much pleased indeed," said Madge, recollecting the letter she had received from the Shakespearian enthusiast; "he said he had not seen anything like it since Miss O'Neil."

"Did he? Now, come, that was very civil of him, and not bad judgment either, for I saw her myself, and you resemble her in many points. Come now, my

dear, you are dropping off to sleep, just you O'Neil off to bed."

And the good old woman, closing the door, took Madge gently by the shoulder, and pushed her before her up the stairs.

On the dressing-table, in Madge's room, lay a twisted slip of paper. She took it up and read in Rose's handwriting:

"G. H. was greatly disappointed at not finding you to-night. He has something very particular to say to you; he will be away all day to-morrow. He says he will see you in the evening, and you must keep yourself disengaged, as it is most important. I wonder what it is: you will tell me, Madge, won't you?"

When Madge had finished reading the paper, she smoothed it out mechanically between her hands, laid it on the table again, and seated herself on the edge of her bed. The words which she had just perused made no impression on her mind. Her thoughts went back to the interview she had gone through, and as she recollected Philip Vane's last speech, her face grew gray, and set, and rigid, and her hands almost involuntarily locked themselves together in front of her.

"Not the remotest intention of going with me! that was what he said; his business engagements would prevent him. His business engagements! So that I am to go away to America, Australia, or to any other place where my employers may choose to take me, and he is to remain at home. I am to be thrown into

such society as I may chance to meet, to make my own way as best I can, and he, the only person in the world to whom I can look, or ought to look, for advice, consolation, or help, is to remain here, consoling himself for my absence by the receipt of a larger income derived from my earnings, which he will undoubtedly take every means to secure. It is too low, too mean, too unmanly!

"To go away by myself to the other end of the world for three years, that is what he asked me! I will not do it, come what may, I will not do it! I have been too patient and too quiet as it is; I have slaved for him ungrudgingly, unrepiningly, in the knowledge that I was his wife, and in the ridiculous hope that his acknowledgment of my position was merely a matter of time. Now he proposes to get rid of me for three years, and with such a man as Philip Vane, it is not difficult to understand what that means. Three years! But only two have elapsed since we were married, and even in that short time my attraction for him has so waned, my hold on him has so relaxed, that he makes me such a proposition as this.

"What is it?" she cried suddenly, stepping leisurely across the room, and looking at herself in the looking-glass on the dressing-table. "Have I grown plain, old, or repulsive? I confess I cannot see the alteration," she added proudly, shaking her hair back, after a moment's inspection of herself; "nor if Mr. Philip Vane thinks so, is his opinion shared by every one. Here,"

laying her hand on Rose's crumpled note, "here is evidence to the contrary. Here is some one younger, better looking, and, unless I am very much mistaken, better bred, than Mr. Philip Vane, who would give all that he holds dearest in life for the companionship which that gentleman despises! Another example, God knows not wanted, of the misery set forth in those words, 'too late.' If I had only known Gerald Hardinge—I talk like a fool! Gerald Hardinge is a boy, who is nothing to me, and Philip Vane is—my husband."

Her husband! The mere sound of the word sent her thoughts into a different current. Philip Vane was still the principal figure, not as she had just seen him—cold, sneering, practical, and hard—but ardent, romantic, and impassioned. Chepstow Castle and the path along the windings of the silver Wye, the young man so different in the polished ease of his demeanour, and the style of his conversation, even in the fit of his clothes, and his graceful negligent manner of carrying himself from any one she had ever seen before. The stolen interviews, the long walks, finally the quiet marriage, with the local fisherman and his wife as the only witnesses; all these scenes and imaginations came floating across her brain and mysteriously served to still the storm which was raging within her breast. Philip could not mean what he had said; he could not think of parting with her for three years! It was to try her, perhaps, that he had suggested it; and she had fallen so readily into the trap. Perhaps she, too, was to blame; her place was by his side, and she

ought to have tried to fall in with his proposition for her going to London. She would agree to that now, she would tell him so to-morrow, and then there would be no more questions of her going abroad, and the old happy time, the time of two years ago, would come back again. And so thinking, Madge Pierrepoint fell asleep.

These kindly feelings, these hopes for the future, had not passed away when Madge awoke in the morning. On first opening her eyes, indeed, the sense of some impending calamity, which she had felt so strongly on the receipt of Philip's last letter on the previous morning, haunted her again; but when she recollected her recent thoughts, and her determination to submit herself to her husband's wishes, so far at least as accepting an engagement in London was concerned, she speedily got the better of her weakness, and had not much difficulty in persuading herself that a happy future was yet in store for her. So, full of hopes and anticipations, she started forth soon after she had finished her breakfast. She knew that at that time she need fear no interruption from Rose, who during the whole of the morning was busy with her various lessons, or from Miss Cave, who, after the ordering of her little household, invariably set forth to take her place in the box-office of the theatre, a position which just then claimed her attention even more rigidly than usual, as the season was about to terminate, and all outstanding accounts had to be carefully gone through.

Madge knew, moreover, that at such an hour she should be able to walk through the streets without undergoing the severe scrutiny which was usually bestowed upon her. The good people of Wexeter, though better bred than those of many other provincial towns, were yet human. Consequently, the sight of anybody whom they recognised as connected with the theatrical profession, when attired in ordinary costume, and proceeding through the streets in an ordinary manner, awoke in them an amount of curiosity which betrayed itself, even amongst the highest and most refined, in covert glances, amongst the less delicate in prolonged stares, and amongst the boys in loud shouts of recognition and war-whoops of a wild character, indicative of a desire on the part of the shouters to make an onslaught on the persons observed, and to ascertain by pinches and other manual appliances whether they were really flesh and blood. Miss Cave, indeed, had a legend which she was accustomed to narrate on special occasions, setting forth that within the memory of her father, the actors had been known as "lakers," and that on any of them being recognised in the streets, the cry of "The lakers, the lakers!" would call forth the utterance of the ferocious hint to "smash their heads agin the wall." This, however, was in the dark ages; and now the recognised members of the company were only subjected to a great amount of staring and whispered observations, generally of a complimentary character.

Even from this torture—for torture it was to a

sensitive-minded woman—Madge Pierrepont was free during her early walk. It was a tacitly-recognised tradition among the Wexeter people, that no one was to be seen in the streets until the afternoon. The members of the cathedral, their families, and a few ladies, old and young, regularly attended morning service, before and after which the female heads of families might have been seen discharging their marketing duties; but the generality of these persons, constituting what was called society in the good old town, never appeared in public until after that meal, which by a polite fiction passed as luncheon, but which in most cases was understood to be dinner.

Thus, when Madge reached the lane at the back of the Dumpington turnpike, she found the spot almost as much deserted as on the previous night, scattered parties of working people in the distant fields being the only human creatures within view.

Eleven o'clock rang out from the cathedral as she arrived within sight of her destination; and on hearing the sound, she quickened her pace; and when she turned into the little lane, her heart was beating fast, and her face was all aglow. She was compensated for her hurry, however, by finding that she was first at the spot; and it was not until after she had taken two or three leisurely turns up and down, recovering her breath, that she heard the sound of wheels, and looking round, saw Philip Vane alight from a cab by the turnpike, and advance towards her.

That Major Vane was not in a very good temper, was evident from his first words.

"You are going to tell me that I am late, I suppose," he said; "but you need not, because I know it. Not that I overslept myself, or anything of that sort. How anybody sleeps at all in that infernal hotel, is a matter of wonder to me; it's a sin and a shame that a place like that shouldn't have something better than such a pothouse for a gentleman to put up at."

"I wasn't going to say a word about your being late, Philip; I am only sorry to hear you were not comfortable at the Half Moon. Everybody speaks so well of the house."

"It may be all very well for bagmen, and people of that kind," said Major Vane, with great disgust.

"It has the reputation of being very clean," said Madge.

"Clean!" echoed the Major; "I knew you would say that. When people can say nothing else for an inn, they say it's clean. Just as when they can say nothing else for a man, they say he is good-natured. All I know is, the beds seem as if they were stuffed with potatoes instead of feathers; and they give you cotton sheets—cotton sheets, by Jove!"

"Well, it was only for one night, Philip," said Madge soothingly. "To-day you will be able to go back to your London luxuries."

"My London luxuries—while you struggle on here! Is that what you mean to convey?" said Philip Vane, looking at her sharply.

"No, indeed, I did not mean to convey anything of the kind," said Madge quietly; "I meant no sneer. And, indeed," she added, with a desperate effort at cheerfulness, "I do not intend you to enjoy those luxuries, if luxuries they be, much longer by yourself. I intend to come up and share them with you."

"The deuce you do!" said the Major in a loud key. "O, you have been thinking over what I said to you last night, then?"

"I have."

"What is the result of your deliberation?"

"I will tell you, Philip; but before I tell you, let me say one word about myself, about ourselves. I have been thinking a great deal, not merely about this one proposition, but about our lives altogether; and it strikes me that, for the last few months at all events, there has been a sort of division between us; not expressed, indeed, but nevertheless existing, which should not be. Our interests are one, and our great point in life should be to carry them out by working together loyally, and in unison. Do you follow me, Philip?"

He was standing with his face turned towards her now, but with his eyes looking far away over her shoulder, swaying himself to and fro, and switching his legs with a small cane which he carried in his hand.

"O yes, I follow you!" he said; "it isn't time for me to speak just yet, while you are dealing in gene-

ralities. I am waiting until you come to the point, before I have my little say."

Madge winced as he spoke, but took no farther notice. Then she proceeded:

"I have no doubt that I have been very foolish in allowing my fears to get the better of me, and in refusing to go and act in London. It must seem ridiculous to you that I should be wasting what remains to me of my youth and energy in playing to provincial audiences, and in earning so small a salary. I can fully understand that, from what you saw of me two years ago, you imagined that I should by this time have made much greater progress, and been enabled to contribute much more effectively to our income. You shall not have that cause for complaint any longer. I will not even refuse to appear in any style of character which your good sense and knowledge of the world may decide that I should undertake with a chance of success; I will give up any scruples of the kind which I have hitherto held, and if you will get me an engagement—and I am sure, amongst all the people you know, there must be plenty who would be proud to oblige you—I will go to London."

She looked up into his face as she said these last words, and made a slight movement of her hand towards him, as though expectant of some little recognition of her speech. In this, however, she was disappointed. Major Vane merely stopped himself in

the act of switching his legs, and looking down at her, said,

"You seem to have mistaken what I said to you last night; there was no question of going to London in the matter."

"No, not in what you last proposed, I know; but you have said more than once that you wished I would go to London, and now I am not merely willing, but anxious to do so, Philip."

"It seems impossible to get you women to be business-like," said Major Vane pettishly. "I took the trouble to come down here yesterday, bringing you an offer, which I should have thought you would only have been too glad to have availed yourself of, and given me my reply at once. You demanded time for deliberation, and I accorded it. Now, when you should communicate to me your decision, you branch off upon a totally different topic."

His tone was harsh and morose; his manner half scornful, half savage. As Madge listened to and looked at him, all her recently-formed resolutions of submission, all her growing hopes for peace in the present, and happiness in the future, melted away. If such were to be the response to all her overtures of affection, they had been made for the last time.

Hurt, proud, and defiant, she threw her head back, and said with as much calmness as she could call to her aid,

"Since you wish our relations to be merely on a strict business footing, you will find me prepared to

meet your wishes so far. You ask me if I will accept a three years' engagement to travel with a theatrical company through America and Australia, you during that time remaining in England. Do I state the matter rightly?"

"With almost legal precision," said Major Vane with a sneer.

"Then to that proposition I answer, No, no, no! See here, Philip Vane: I came to you this morning prepared to do my best to set matters right between us; to meet you more than half way; to give you, if it were possible, even more freedom than you have now; and not to attempt to claim my position until I had made such a name in London as would render you not ashamed to acknowledge me. To this separation—for such the Australian scheme really is, call it by what name you like—I could not have consented; but it might have been modified in some way, or if you had been kind and gentle with me, I—God knows—I might have gone away. But," she added, speaking slowly, and curling her lip, and looking him full in the face, "when you allow your hard bed and cotton sheets to influence your temper so far as to make you forget, not merely the regard due to me as your wife, but the respect which I should claim as a woman, I meet you on your own ground, and distinctly refuse to accept this offer which you have made me."

"O, you do, do you?" said the Major slowly, giving his legs one vicious switch; "don't let's have

any mistake about it this time; let me understand you quite clearly. You refuse?"

"I do!" she cried, exasperated at the mocking tone in which he spoke; "I do, and I tell you so plainly. Do you think I have been blinded by this pretext for an instant? Do you think that I do not see plainly enough that your object is to rid yourself of me, apparently for a time only, but really for ever?"

"Well, and suppose it were?" he said quietly.

"Suppose it were!" she echoed; "well, then, I tell you plainly, I would frustrate it. Do you hear? There is a devil I have in me, which, once roused, renders me a match for you, long-headed and crafty as you are."

"Nice style of woman this, by George!" muttered Major Vane, low, but loud enough for her to hear.

"If she is not a nice style of woman, she has only you to thank for it," cried Madge. "What she is, you made her; for what she will be, the responsibility will rest on you. If you were a different style of man, I would speak to you in a different way. I would appeal to you, for God's sake, to remember what we are to each other, and to avert this ruin of soul and body which is overhanging us by acknowledging me, and giving me a portion, a very small portion, of your life. But to you I simply say that I am your wife; that I shall claim the position which the law will

award me; and that any attempt of yours to disown or get rid of me will be fruitless and vain."

As she uttered these last words, she emphasised them by stamping her foot and throwing out her hand. It was a natural movement with her; but scarcely had she made it before she grew hot and flushed, knowing to what taunt she had exposed herself. Philip Vane was much too brutal to neglect such an opportunity.

"*Brava, brava!*" he cried, clapping his hands softly together. "Deuced good that! Always keep your energy for your peroration. You really have improved wonderfully; and I am deuced sorry, for Wuff's sake, that you decline to astonish—not the natives, but the colonists. Now to business. You have been remarkably candid with me; I will be equally frank with you. In the first place, the fact, which you make such a point of asserting, and which you look upon as your trump card—that I am your husband—would be the very thing which would upset your apple-cart and ruin your play. I have only to prove that I *am* your husband, and the law, which you were good enough just now to threaten to evoke, will give me the power of forcing you to accept this very excellent offer, which you refuse so contemptuously."

"I don't believe it."

"Exactly. I thought you wouldn't; and, unfortunately, it isn't a question which we shall be able to bring to any issue, as I don't intend to assert my conjugal rights. You have happened to hit with remark-

able dexterity the right nail on the head: I did intend our little separation to be not merely temporary, but final. Oddly enough, I intend it still."

"You may intend it," said Madge bitterly; "but you cannot carry it out."

"There," said the Major, giving his leg a few persuasive taps, "there we differ. I rather think I can. You are my wife—understand, I admit that at once. If, to speak after the pleasant fashion which you have adopted—if you had been another style of woman, I might have been more reserved. I might have introduced a little innocent deception into the matter; have told you, as they do in novels, that our marriage isn't a legal one, either because the parson was a postman in disguise, or that I was a Quaker, while you were a Protestant, or some ingenious stratagem of that kind. But with you I do nothing of the sort; I fully admit the legality of our marriage; while at the same time I bid you a respectful farewell."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this: that by a method more speedy, more efficacious, and less expensive than any known to your friend the law, I dissolve this marriage between us. And I will be generous enough to let you into my plan, which is as simple as it is excellent. From this day forth you will never look upon me again. I disappear—efface myself, as the French say. Don't ask me how, because I scarcely know myself yet. I may emigrate; I may go abroad; may join Wuff's company as the Bounding Brother of something or other. I

don't know what I shall do; but I do know this, that you will never see me again. Listen now, Madge Pierrepont," said he, suddenly changing his tone; "for Madge Pierrepont you are once again. I have been talking in a light tone; but I have meant every word I said—every syllable, by George! Our marriage is known to no one but ourselves; and when we decide upon ignoring it, it is just as though it had never happened. I will never interfere with your plans and projects. I swear that. But on your part you must leave me free. I need say nothing about that, however; for you will have no choice in the matter."

He wheeled round, and walked rapidly away without turning his head. Had he looked round, possibly he might have felt some touch of compunction or compassion; for he would have seen his wife lying senseless on the ground.

CHAPTER VII.

Gerald's Luck.

THE Dumpington turnpike-keeper—a man naturally of a pleasant and social disposition, and inclined secretly to repine at the dulness of the life to which circumstances had relegated him—was in the habit of killing time by gazing out of one or other of the square panes of glass let in at either side of the toll-house and wondering what would be the next object likely to present itself for the relief of his monotony. The dust left by the passing by of a flock of sheep yet lingered in the air; and the turnpike-man had derived at least five minutes' amusement in watching the manner in which the sheep had at first blindly refused to go through the gate, dashing off in every other direction, sticking their heads into the hedgerows, bleating in a remonstrating manner, which was ineffective perhaps from being carried on in one note, notwithstanding the shake with which it concluded, and in seeing them finally, after having been run over by a very circus-rider of a dog, being hustled through the gate ignominiously on three legs, the fourth remaining in the hands of the driver or his assistant boy. The turnpike-keeper, with these reminiscences fresh in his mind, and a vacuous smile on his face, suddenly descried a new object of interest.

This was a woman advancing slowly, and with wavering footsteps. Her dress was covered with dust, and her hat was crushed and bent. When the turnpike-man first saw her, her veil was off, and her head thrown back as if to catch the air; but, as she approached, she pulled the veil over her face, and seemingly nerving herself for what she had to do, tried to steady her footsteps, and advanced with a swifter and surer pace. With more delicacy than could have been expected from him, the Robinson Crusoe of the highway gave up his first idea of addressing her, it being his custom, for the mere sake of hearing the sweet music of speech, to accost every passer-by, and did not even look after her until she was through the gate, and some distance on the road to the town. Then, standing at his door, and scientifically, with his little finger, plumbing the depths of his pipe-bowl preparatory to filling it anew, the worthy man muttered to himself:

"She had had a downer, she had; was all covered with dust, and went very shaky on her legs. Queer case that; respectable-looking woman, too respectable for a tramp, but been on the drink like the rest of 'em. That's what ruins 'em all—the drink. If it hadn't been for the drink, my wife would have been here now, sitting in that easy-chair, and giving me a bit of her mind probably. Ah, well, the drink ain't so black as he's painted; but he had laid hold of that poor creature that went by just now, surely."

And the toll-keeper, turning back into the house,

proceeded to fill his pipe from the capacious stomach of a brown earthenware image which stood on his chimney-piece, with the full conviction that the woman he had just seen go by was drunk.

That woman was Madge Pierrepont; and after a cursory glance at her, most people would have been of the toll-keeper's opinion. When she had passed beyond the ken of such as might be within the toll-house, she threw back her veil and raised her head well aloft again, once more dropping into the slow and wavering pace. It was with difficulty, indeed, that she managed to make any progress; for her knees trembled beneath her, and her vision was so dim and flurried as to necessitate her stopping after every few paces, and pressing her hands tightly before her eyes.

In these short intervals of rest the recollection of what she had just gone through would come back upon her: the vision of her husband confronting her, with a sneer upon his lips, would stand out terribly distinct; some of his words, the cruellest and most bitter of them, would surge up in her ears. Then, knowing that another instant's abandonment of herself to such thoughts would cause her again to faint away, with one strong act of will she would dismiss them from her mind, and doggedly plod on her way. Later on she would think of all this, go through it bit by bit, sift out what it meant, and determine what she ought to do; later on, when there was a bed near on which she could fall back and rest, a hand near to steady her or to smooth her forehead, a voice to tell

her that she was not all alone in the world, and that though she had been deserted— No, no; that no one must ever know. But she was weak now, and could not think it out properly. Only let her get home.

So on through the quaint old streets, quiet and deserted now; for it is one o'clock, and at that hour Wexeter dines. The cathedral dignitaries are taking their luncheon in pleasantly shaded rooms, with low ceilings and black oak fittings, where generations of cathedral dignitaries had done precisely the same thing at precisely the same hour. The ill-used hard-worked notes of the long-legged narrow-bodied pianos in the establishments for young ladies at South-Hedge have ceased to sound; for the young ladies are now engaged in attacking roast mutton with an appetite which they will speedily learn to be ashamed of. And afterwards there will be an hour's walk in the garden, with their arms lovingly entwined round each other's waists, and their mouths filled with little backbitings and jealousies, before the overture to *Semiramide* bursts forth upon the scent-laden air, to the delight of the invalid old gentleman who has taken lodgings in that quarter for quiet and repose. Peacefully sleeps Mrs. Twiddle, original manufacturer of the celebrated Bonneton lace; and three doors off, equally peacefully, sleeps Miss Grylls, her late assistant and present rival, behind the wire-blind in her shop-window, on which the word "from" is painted so very small, and "Twiddle's" so very large. Nothing is to be seen of the proprietor of the photographic and religious fancy-

assortment shop, where you may pick up a neat ecclesiastical book-marker for thirty shillings, or a reduced copy in stone of the ancient abbey font, handy to keep rings and shirt-studs in, for five pounds. Slumber, too, his young men, who wear white cravats and black coats, and look like curates. Only one verger, standing at the cathedral door—for there is a train due about this time, and it is a likely day for excursionists—sees Madge Pierrepont crossing the yard under the shade of the great elm-trees, where the rooks are holding a noisy concert over her head, and he does not recognise her. Her progress has been slow, but unwatched; and at length she has reached her own door.

Madge longs for rest and quiet; but she is not to enjoy them yet. At the foot of the stairs she is confronted by Miss Cave. The old lady has just returned from a long morning's work at the box-office, having gone through all the accounts of the closing season, having paid away and received to the uttermost farthing, and having been able to submit a very satisfactory balance-sheet to Mr. Dobson the manager. Naturally, therefore, she is in a good temper, and anxious to relieve herself, after the tedium of business, by a pleasant chat with her lodger, who is such a favourite with her.

"Why, where have you been, my dear?" said Miss Cave, holding up her hands as her eyes fell upon Madge's dust-covered dress. "Not been knocked down by one of those dreadful cows, surely?" the

idea of being tossed, gored, and trampled upon by errant cattle ranking foremost amongst the old lady's self-inflicted troubles.

"No, Miss Cave," said Madge with a faint smile, looking down at her dress and endeavouring to brush the dust off with her hand; "no, I have only been for a country walk, and, feeling a little tired, sat down in the hedgerow, without particularly observing where I placed myself."

"Well, my dear, what you can want with taking long country walks, after all the work you have gone through, I cannot understand. I can't say I think much of the country; for what with the cows and the dust and the crowds of midges that buzz all about you, it seems to me to be more pain than pleasure, taking it altogether. Now, when I go out of Wexeter, give me the seaside, I say; and, talking of that, my dear, I have brought some news which I think will please you."

"Indeed, Miss Cave; and what might that be?"

"Well, Mr. Dobson is finely delighted at the success of his season—as well he may be, as being the best he has had the last three years. And when he said so to me just now, I up and told him at once that it was all owing to you, my dear, and that he had had no leading lady here for years that was a patch upon you, and that you were as great a favourite out of the theatre as in it."

"That was very kind of you, dear Miss Cave."

"It was only the truth, Madge—there, I never

called you Madge before, not being given to use Christian names freely, as I find is the custom in music-halls and low places of that kind; but as I am fond of you, I will do so now and in future—it was only the truth, Madge; and Mr. Dobson agreed to it; and then he asked me how I thought it would do if he was to take the Avonmouth Theatre for the short summer season; that would take in the regatta and the races and the grand military review. ‘Miss Pierrepont would be new at Avonmouth,’ he said; ‘and I think she would draw.’ I told him I thought so too; but that he must give you better terms than you had here; for there would be the expenses of moving for yourself and your sister; and you would have perhaps to dress a little more than you do here, it being a gay place. Dobson didn’t see it at first; but I held to it. So finally he told me to talk to you about it, and offer you an extra pound a week.”

Miss Cave had expected that her announcement would be received with great pleasure. She was disappointed when Madge, with a grave face, said:

“I am much obliged to you, dear Miss Cave, and to Mr. Dobson; but I don’t think the offer would suit.”

“Not suit you! You are too shy and timid, Madge. You dislike going among strange people; and perhaps you are afraid of the officers and flighty fellows that you have heard of in Avonmouth. Don’t you be afraid of them, my dear. Dobson wouldn’t dream of

going without taking me with him; and I shall be sure to look after you."

"No, indeed, it isn't that."

"Indeed, what can it be, then? O, I know—that young Hardinge."

"Mr. Hardinge? What about him?"

"Well, Dobson wanted him to go too. The Avonmouth Theatre has not been open for two years now, and the scenery all wants looking after and touching up; and Dobson wanted young Hardinge to go off in advance, and get it ready by the time you came there; but when he was spoken to this morning, he said he was very sorry he could not, that his engagement was up, and that he did not think there was any chance of his coming back to the circuit."

"And what has that to do with me, dear Miss Cave?"

"Well, my dear, I have got eyes in my head, though they are not so bright as they were, and I can see that while that young man is desperately in love with you, you have a sneaking kindness for him; and I thought you might have set your horses together, and—"

"Mr. Hardinge hasn't spoken to me on the subject, dear Miss Cave; and I assure you I have not the smallest knowledge of his movements."

"Well, my dear, no offence. I won't take your answer to Dobson just now, lest you might change your mind. Think it over and let me know to-morrow; and if I were you, I would lie down a bit after

dinner and rest myself. You ought to be very brilliant to-night; for it is not only the last night, but Dunsany's benefit; and he's sure to have a fine house; for he's a Buffalo, or a Druid, or something of that kind; and we shall be full of brothers, with aprons on, and green ribbons and tin thing-a-me-jigs round their necks."

Then Madge, nodding kindly at the old lady, went upstairs, and, after looking into the sitting-room to tell Rose to get her dinner by herself, as she felt too tired and unwell to eat, went to her own room, and, locking the door, threw herself at full length upon her bed. There are some people upon whom any great grief has a stunning overwhelming effect, so overwhelming that it numbs their brain and paralyses their power of thought. Madge Pierrepont was of these. With all the wish, she felt utterly powerless to deliberate what effect her recent interview with her husband ought to have on her future life, or even to recollect the details of that interview. It was all too sudden, too recent; the weight of the blow seemed to have deprived her of the power of thinking over what would be its result, or even when it had been given. She strove to rally, to collect her senses, to think it over; but all in vain. She lay in a dull lethargic state, from which the recollection of what Miss Cave had said about Gerald Hardinge roused her only for an instant. Then she relapsed, and, gradually losing consciousness, fell into a deep unbroken sleep.

In that state she remained, until she was roused

by a loud knocking at the door, and Rose's voice outside, telling her it was time for her to go to the theatre. At first she listened mechanically, without the power to move or even to speak, then muttering something sufficient to satisfy her sister that she had been heard, Madge struggled into a sitting position, and clasping her head with both her hands, strove to collect her scattered senses, and to comprehend what had been passing around her. It flashed upon her in an instant, the interview with Philip in the lane, the long dreary walk back, with heavy heart and wavering footsteps, the talk with Miss Cave, and her mention of the Avonmouth Theatre. She recollected it all, but what would be the result of it all was as far off as ever; she had come to no decision, and she could come to none now. What she had to do now was to hurry off to the theatre and to act. To act! With the feeling of an iron band around her temples, and her heart throbbing like a ball of fire.

Mr. Dunsany's friends, who, as Miss Cave expected, mustered in large numbers, were very much pleased with their evening's entertainment, more especially when the hero of the night came on in the after-piece, wearing, in addition to his theatrical costume, the insignia of the Order of Friendly Brothers, to which he belonged, and interpolated in his dialogue many mystic allusions, only understood by the initiated. The audience generally was of a convivial rather than of a critical character, and more appreciative of the comic than of the tragic acting. It was agreed on all sides,

however, that Miss Pierrepont was "a fine woman," and if she failed in impressing them as they had been led to believe, they laid it more to their own want of comprehension, than to any shortcoming on her part.

As for Madge herself, she acknowledged afterwards she owed it entirely to the early training of her memory, and to her methodical practice of her profession, that she got through her part at all. She dressed herself in a dream, and in a dream she went through her various scenes, speaking when the cue was given to her, and not missing a word of what she had to say, "doing her spouting," as Philip Vane would have called it, with due emphasis and intonation, but with eyes that were without fire, and gesticulations void of life or energy. How she got through it she knew not, but at last her performance came to an end, and she was led on before the curtain by the delighted Dunsany. Still dazed, she went to her dressing-room, and exchanged her theatrical attire for her ordinary walking-dress. Still dazed, she was coming forth from the stage-door, when she was confronted by Gerald Hardinge, who took her hand.

Then she roused at once.

"Good-evening, Miss Pierrepont," said Gerald, very polite, and rather distant, for Gonnop, the hall-keeper, was standing close by, and his ears were full-cocked; "may I have the pleasure of seeing you home?"

Madge thanked him for his proposed escort, and they went out together.

When they were in the street, and out of hearing, Gerald turned to her and said:

"Didn't Rose give you my message?"

"Certainly."

"And you were going away without waiting for me?"

"Not at all. I fully expected to see you where I did."

"Did you? And yet you looked astonished as though my presence had taken you quite unawares. You have had that same strange look, however, during the whole evening. I was watching you from the wings while you were acting, and I saw it then. I see it now."

"Do you?" said Madge, trying to smile, but there was a leaden weight on her eyelids, and the muscles of her mouth refused to move.

"Yes," said Gerald Hardinge, gazing into her face; "your appearance gives me the notion of some one who has been bewitched, or is under a spell."

"Break the spell, then, and exorcise the demon," cried Madge, still striving against herself; "but don't let us stand here in the middle of the street, glaring into each other's faces, or we shall excite the wonderment of the passers-by."

"No," said Gerald; "let me take you home, I have lots to say to you."

"We won't go to my lodgings, I think, Gerald,"

said Madge, mindful of what Miss Cave had said to her in the morning; "let's walk round the crescent, there is not a soul near, and you shall tell me all you have to say."

"As you please," he said shortly.

"Don't be angry, Gerald; I am sure I am right in what I am doing," whispered Madge, laying her hand on his arm. And instantly he was tamed and happy.

As they turned into the crescent, the chimes of the cathedral clock rang out the four quarters, and the deep bell struck eleven. Listening to it, and looking up at the great yellow moon riding high in the sky, Madge recollected where she had been the same hour on the previous evening, and an irrepressible shudder ran through her frame. Gerald felt the vibration of the hand lying on his arm, and looked down gravely and earnestly at her.

"What is it, Madge?" he asked. "You trembled then from head to foot; there is something the matter with you. What is it? I insist upon knowing!"

"There is nothing wrong with me, Gerald, indeed," said Madge; "believe me there is not. I have been working hard, you know, and I was perhaps a little overcome by the fatigue and the heat. But the season is over now, and I shall have rest—at least until I go to Avonmouth."

"O, Dobson has made that proposition already, has he?" said Gerald. "I knew he was going to do so, but I scarcely thought it would be so quick; however, you are not going to Avonmouth, Madge."

"You are not, Gerald, I know."

"Nor are you!"

"Are my future movements, then, to be influenced by yours, sir?"

"I hope and trust so, Madge," said the young man earnestly; "I devoutly hope and trust so."

There was something in his tone which had more effect in rousing her and fixing her attention than anything she had experienced within the last twenty-four hours. Up to this point she had been striving against an overpowering lassitude and want of energy, which still retained their hold upon her; had been trying to laugh and make light conversation, as it were, for the mere sake of keeping herself up to the required pitch of answering her companion's remarks. But his last few earnest words had worked a charm. Her attention was aroused, and her interest excited.

"If that is to be the case," said she, "you must no longer talk in riddles, but speak out plainly, Gerald."

"I want nothing better," said the young man. "I told Rose, last night, to let you know I wanted to speak to you on a most important matter."

"Yes, I recollect on making the appointment Rose told me that it was important; and it is important, is it, Gerald?"

"To me the most important matter in my life," said Gerald, not looking at her, and speaking very low.

"Tell me, then," said Madge, in the same tone,

Under the fascination of that moment, with his low voice murmuring in her ear, her hand resting on his arm, in the full consciousness that he was devoted to her body and soul, the great mental agony she had just been labouring under melted away entirely for the time.

"Tell me, then," she whispered again.

"Why should I tell you the first part of it again?" he murmured, "unless, indeed, you have the same gratification in hearing that I have in saying it. You know how I love and worship you, my darling! How, since the first hour I saw you, I have been your slave, never happy but when near you, and having no other thought but of and for you. You hear me, Madge?"

She made him no answer, save what he might infer from the smallest pressure of her hand upon his arm.

"I have said all this to you before, and you have listened to me and laughed at me, and while you half forbade my thus addressing you, let me go on, because you said it was idle talk. I told you then that the time would come when such talk would be idle no longer, when I might have the power of attaining such a position as would enable me to ask you to marry me. You recollect all this, Madge?"

He bent his head and looked down at her. Her face was very white, and it was more by the motion of her lips than from anything he heard, that he understood her to assent.

"Do you recollect further what you said?"

"I do."

"I recollect the very words: 'You shall ask me when the time arrives, Gerald,' you said, 'and I will answer you then.' Madge, the time has arrived now, and I claim your answer."

"Gerald!" said Madge, with a low cry.

"It has arrived now, my darling," he continued, passing his arm around her. "I am to remain a scene-painter and a theatre drudge no longer. Listen, dear one! For months past I have been working in secret, and have completed two pictures, which I sent to London. Yesterday morning I heard from the agent I had consigned them to, that they have been bought at the prices which I had fixed upon them; bought, the agent tells me, by some rich, eccentric old man, who wishes me to come to London, and pledges himself to find sufficient commissions for me to occupy my time for months to come. More than this, the agent advises me at once to come to town, and introduce myself to my patron, as, should he take a fancy to me, there is no knowing where the good results may end. When I got that letter, Madge, my first thought was of you; now, I said, I can ask her to be my wife; now I can ask her to link her lot with mine, not as the obscure drudge of a country theatre, but as one who has a fair prospect of fame and fortune; now I can offer her rest from the toil she has undergone, and freedom from the annoyances and insolences which she is compelled to put up with. Madge,

darling, I can, I do, offer you this now. What do you say in reply?"

Nothing.

She said nothing. He drew her closely to him, and bending down noticed that her eyelids were closed, and when he pressed his lips upon her cheek, it was stone cold.

Gerald feared she had fainted, but immediately afterwards she half unclosed her eyes, and murmured, in broken tones, "I am very ill, Gerald! Take me home—take me home!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"In the dead unhappy Night."

IN her room at last. Unseen by Miss Cave, who had remained at the theatre to settle accounts with Dunsany, and to talk over the *pros* and *cons* of the suggested Avonmouth season with manager Dobson. Scarcely seen by her sister Rose, who had been awaiting her arrival impatiently, and who rushed forward, directly she entered, to ask her what had been the purport of Gerald Hardinge's communication, but whose love was greater even than her curiosity, and who, on seeing that Madge was ill and suffering, at once consented to postpone her inquiries until the morning.

In her own room at last, with the door locked, her hot heavy clothes thrown aside, and a light dressing-gown donned in their place. There she is, seated at the dressing-table, her hair thrown back over her shoulders, and her chin resting on her hand. The time was now arrived when she could think it all out, the time that she longed for during her weary walk homeward up the Dumpington-road, the time that she longed for as she lay prostrate, dazed and semi-conscious, upon the bed before going to the theatre. She could think it all out now—all—all. Why, good Heavens! even since she was last in that room what

a change had swept over the current of her life! What a new vista for the future had been opened up before her!

He did intend that the Australian journey should be merely an excuse for a separation, not merely temporary, but final. When she taxed him with it, he acknowledged it. She was glad she had been beforehand with him there; that was one instance, at least, where the cunning on which he so prided himself had not been able to cajole or deceive her. What a moral coward he was! He would have taken leave of her with fine promises and pleasant speeches, and let her go away; and then, when he knew himself to be far beyond her reach, he would have let her know the truth, that he had deserted her and cast her off for ever. Not even then, perhaps: he might have allowed her to go on wearing away her life, hoping against hope, and ignorant of the state of widowhood to which she had long since been abandoned.

Now she knew the worst. Come what might in the future, at least she would not drift into it unprepared. He had spoken plainly enough, said in so many words, that marriage was dissolved between them. He must have had that step in contemplation for some time past; such a resolution was not taken on the spur of the moment. And as she passed in review the recent occasions on which she and Philip Vane had met, and the tone of the few short letters he had written to her, she saw clearly how he had, bit by bit, been loosening the tie—never very strong, save

in its legality—which existed between them, and preparing for the final rupture.

And now it had come. “You will never look upon my face again;” that was what he said. What had she done? Had she been so specially wicked, had her life been so specially happy, that she should be visited by an affliction like this, that she should be forced to bear the brunt of the battle alone, quite unaided; more than that, even having to succour and provide for one weaker and younger than herself, without one friend to turn to in her extremity, without one living soul to speak to her a kind word, or to lend her a helping hand?

Gerald Hardinge! As the thought flashed across her the name rose simultaneously to her lips, and was spoken aloud.

She raised her face from her hands, where in the agony of her grief she had buried it, and catching sight of its reflection in the glass before her, could not help noticing, all blurred and tear-stained as it was, the delicacy of its features, the sweetness of its expression. She peered at it long and curiously, as though it had been another woman’s face, now pitting a dimple with her finger, now tracing with her nail the track of a line or two which had already begun to appear near her eyes. Then suddenly pushing her chair aside she rose to her feet and again muttered aloud, “Gerald Hardinge!”

“The last time that Gerald spoke to me,” she continued, pacing to and fro in the room, “I listened to

him carelessly and talked to him lightly. Knowing the barrier that existed between us, there was no harm, I thought, in so listening, for it was a break in my dull and dreary life, and a pastime to me; and I knew that Gerald was too much of a gentleman to say anything that might not properly be said to—what he imagined me to be—a good and virtuous girl. Now that barrier exists no longer, and he must learn the truth; I must tell him that I am the deserted wife of another man, that the confidence and companionship which have hitherto existed between us must now be brought to an end, that the terms on which we have hitherto lived, were they to continue, would be dangerous to him and compromising for me. Yes," she added, after a pause, during which she had remained rapt in consideration, "the retribution which Philip Vane will inflict upon me for refusing to obey his commands will be bitter indeed. He can disappear, 'efface himself,' as he says, banish all remembrance of me, if it be not already banished, blot out all traces of his married life, commence a fresh career of dissipation, and look for a new victim to wheedle, and make use of, and desert. He can do all this, for he will be free, while I must remain here, fettered and heart-broken and solitary."

She flung herself prone upon the bed, and clasping her hands behind her head, lay there motionless for some time. When at length she raised her face from the pillow in which it had been hidden, there was on it a strange odd expression, such as those who were

most intimate with it had never seen there. A bright scarlet patch burned on each of her cheeks, there was a wild restless look in her large brown eyes, and her lips, ordinarily so soft and mobile, were set and rigid.

“Why should I be solitary?” she broke forth, raising herself on her elbow, and gazing eagerly before her. “Why should his be all the triumph, and mine all the misery? Why, while he creates a fresh life for himself, should I settle down in apathetic wretchedness and dull despair? He said, truly enough, that our secret was our own, that our marriage was known to none but ourselves; and that when he decided upon ignoring it, it would be just as though it had never happened. It was known but to ourselves and to two others, hired witnesses, whom in no human probability I shall ever come across. What is to prevent me, then, from shaking myself free from the shackles, and seeing whether in life there is not yet some happiness in store for me? What is to prevent? My conscience? Duty? The duty I owe to Philip Vane would sit lightly enough upon me; and is it not his wish? “I will never interfere with your plans and projects, be they what they may;” he swore that, and he will keep his word, only too thankful to lay hold of any act of mine which would tend to our farther estrangement and ratify the separation between us.

“And here is Gerald, whose only thought is to take me to his heart, and make me his wife, who, hard worked as he is at the theatre, has been devoting his

extra hours in labour to gain a position which he could consider worthy to offer me, and who is steeped to the lips not merely in patient devotion to me, but in the desire to rid me of the burden which I now have to bear, and to render life smooth and easy to me.

"Gerald Hardinge's wife! He asked me to become so at once, why should I refuse? I am older than he is, it is true, and my youth has been passed in toil, and, to a certain extent, in privation. But," she added, stopping before the glass, and again surveying her features in it, "I do not think I show the traces of it; I do not think, speaking dispassionately, as Heaven knows I feel, there are many who are better or more attractive-looking, however much my beauty may have palled on Philip Vane.

"Gerald Hardinge's wife! Could I return the love he gives me? My capabilities of loving have not been put to any severe test; it was that silly admiration of a good-looking face and specious manners which led me to like Philip Vane; the idiotic folly of a school-girl, which raves about the colour of a man's eyes, or the shape of his nose; but I doubt whether there was much question of love in the matter. I was sillily fascinated by him in the first few days of our married life; I remember I showed it as much as he would let me, but that is so far off that it seems like a dream. Since then I have been almost constantly separated from him; and when we have met there has been no question of love between us, certainly none

shown, even of regard, on his part. I wonder whether I have ever possessed the faculty of loving, and if so, whether it has died out? I think I can answer that question," she said, smiling gravely. "Last night, when Gerald's arm was round me holding me closely to him, when his face was bending close to mine, when I felt his soft breath on my cheek, and saw the lovelight trembling and fading in his eyes, a shiver ran through me from head to foot, and my soul yearned towards him with a passion hitherto strange to it. Ah, why," she cried, clasping her hands above her head, "why should my life be solitary and blank? Why should this wealth of love which I possess be thus wasted? Why should I not solace what remains to me of my youth, and give up such beauty as I still possess to him who prizes it so dearly? I cannot, I will not, let slip this chance which is offered me so opportunely. I will write a line to Gerald telling him that I accept his offer, and am only impatient to call myself his wife, and thus at the same time I will gratify my love for him, and my revenge on Philip Vane."

The scarlet spot on her cheek burned more brightly than before, and the light was still in her eyes; but the muscles of her mouth, instead of being rigid and set, were moving involuntarily, and her lips were full and humid.

She took her blotting-book and inkstand from off the chest of drawers, arranged them on the table, and sat down to write. But her brain was too much excited, her heart beating far too quickly, to admit of

her sufficiently steadying her thoughts; and the next moment she was up and pacing the room again to and fro, to and fro. No reminiscences of past misery now; all visions of future happiness with Gerald! How handsome he was! how high-bred and gentlemanly he always looked! Not even his coarse common painting-clothes could disfigure him. How softly he always spoke to her, and how he always looked straight into her eyes—not boldly, not triumphantly, but with a strange mixture of diffidence and love! She recollected too the long clinging pressure of his hand. Ah, how she would love him, how she would make up for past years of coldness and neglect! She longed to have him there by her side, that she might tell him how warmly she reciprocated all he had said to her on the previous night. Unable to see him at that instant, she must write to him; that was the next best thing she could do, and she would do so at once.

Seated at the table once again, one hand drumming on the blotting-book, the other idly stretched on the paper in front of her. How should she commence her letter to him? How should she end it? She knew that, she thought. She should put "your wife." His wife? And then the pen slipped from between her fingers, and the other hand ceased drumming, and convulsively grasped the table.

His wife? Not his, but Philip Vane's.

That fact remained indisputable, notwithstanding Philip's repudiation of it, and in spite of all the sophistry which he had talked, and which she had

allowed herself to be persuaded into accepting. Philip Vane's wife, in the sight of heaven, and in the eye of the law. Philip Vane's wife—that was her condition, only to be released therefrom by her own or his death.

Ah, what vague hopes she had cherished of placing herself on an equality with him! what fruitless boasts she had made to herself of claiming as much freedom in her future as he had insisted on his! Were she to take the step she had contemplated—were she to accept the position offered to her—the mere prospect of the expectation of which had filled her with happiness and joy inexplicable—what would be the result? In her own secret soul she would know herself, whatever she might pass for to him and to the world, not to be Gerald Hardinge's wife, but his mistress, and to be Philip Vane's wife still. Even if—looking at the happiness which such a prospect opened up to her, and contrasting it with the certain misery of her future—misery embittered a thousand-fold by the omnipresent recollection of what might have been—she could have stifled the voice of conscience, and clung to the chance thus offered, what guarantee had she that Philip Vane might not some day or other put in an appearance upon the scene, and seek to gain advantage by her default? He had sworn that he would not do so; but she knew well enough that to such a man such an oath meant nothing; and then for the mere passing gratification of two passions, revenge and love, she would have

entailed misery not merely upon herself, but upon the boy who had offered his life for her disposal, and so frankly and loyally had placed his future in her hands.

Following out with strictest scrutiny her self-examination, Madge felt compelled to confess that there were several reasons for giving up the step on which she had so recently determined. The difference of age between them must not be lost sight of. It was well enough now, while Gerald was under the influence of his boyish passion, and while she yet retained enough of her youthful beauty to keep him in thrall, and to render her an object of admiration among his friends. But in a few, very few years' time, she would have lost her bloom, and be advancing towards middle age, while he would yet be in the prime of early manhood. What should she expect then but what she had already undergone? Not that it was possible Gerald could ever treat her as Philip Vane had treated her—he was too manly, too high-spirited, too tender-hearted; but would it not be worse for her than anything she had yet endured, to see that she was merely tolerated by a man to whom her whole soul was given, and in whom the wild ardour of love had been superseded by a feeling of mere tenderness and compassion?

No, no—a thousand times no! She could bear anything but that. Better pluck out this passion of recent growth, though she plucked out her heart and her life at the same time, than let it have a short season of bloom, and a long period of withering

decay. The mirage was fast vanishing away, and again the long level sands of the desert of life which she was compelled to travel, with no well of hope, no oasis of rest and happiness in sight, lay stretching out before her. The shining sands had to be traversed, and the bubbling fountains and the palm-trees' shade had proved mere mockeries of mental vision; so let her proceed upon her pilgrimage at once, and give up all farther thought of those unsubstantial and impossible delights. It could not, must not be. And when Madge Pierrepont had once faced that fact, although in facing it she went through such mental torture as, since the world's creation, has been suffered only by those white-robed few who sacrifice their all in all for duty's sake, she determined on carrying out her resolutions, and came out of the conflict worn and pale and haggard, indeed, but victorious and determined.

What was to be done? The proper course for her to pursue was, as she knew, to see Gerald, and tell him all. But that she could not do. She dared not trust herself. Her courage was insufficient, not merely to carry her through the story of her wrongs, but to bear her up in what she knew to be the unavoidable result, his appeal to her to throw her past life to the winds, and intrust him with her future. She dared not trust herself to see him again; she must hurry away from that place, within the next few hours, in the early morning, and leave what she had to say to him in a note which would be given to Miss Cave. What should she say in that note? Tell him the real

state of the case, and appeal to his sense of honour, to his feeling of pity, not to attempt to follow her? That would never do. Madge Pierrepont's experience of the world was not large; but it was sufficient to tell her that when a man, and especially a young man, is madly in love, appeals to such sentiments are generally made in vain. Such a confession would probably act as a provocative to his pursuit, and that must be stopped at any cost. Seeing Gerald under such circumstances as those, Madge would not have answered for herself; and all the mental anguish which she had undergone, and the triumph which she had obtained, would have been in vain.

After reflection, then, she came to the conclusion that there was but one way by which the end she sought for was to be obtained.

And that way was, to strike his kind and trusting heart a blow which, coming from her hand, would numb and paralyse its action, and prevent its ever again throbbing in response to hers. She "must be cruel only to be kind," and must be content to pass as cold and heartless in Gerald's eyes, rather than let him know her for what she really was. Knowing Gerald as Madge did, she never doubted for an instant that he would refuse to take from her lips any denial which was dictated by prudence or policy, and that the only method by which he could be restrained from farther pursuit would be by touching his pride. That must be done, no matter at what cost to herself; wittingly and knowingly, she must degrade herself in

the sight of the man who so loved her, and had just asked permission to dedicate his life to her.

So she sat down to do it. There, spread out before her, lay the paper which was to have borne his summons to her side, whereon was to have been written her acceptance of his offer. She thought of all this, and the pen which she had taken up dropped again from her fingers. Ah, surely the task was too cruel, the self-imposed burden too heavy for her to bear! Was it not too much to expect that she should not merely continue in the strait and thorny path, closing her eyes to the temptations of the lovely gardens stretching on either side of her, but that she should be called upon to wound and outrage him who offered to share that paradise with her? She could not do it—she could not do it! And Madge hid her face in her hands, and the bitter tears burst forth again. When the paroxysm was over, she rose and bathed her face, and once more returned to the table. Then stopping for some time to try and get more command over her trembling fingers, to try and still the audible beating of her heart, to try and find words in which her meaning might be, with as little harshness as possible, expressed, she wrote the following letter:

“MY DEAR GERALD,—If you have ever had any kind feeling for me, and I know you have, Gerald, you will need to remember it all when you read this. What I write now I ought to have said to you last

night, if not before. No, not before, for up till last night I had only looked upon what you have said to me from time to time as so much boyish nonsense, not to be thought of seriously by either of us. I knew that most boys—don't be offended, Gerald, there will come a time when you will consider youth a thing not to be ashamed of—that most boys admire women older than themselves; and there was a greater reason for your liking me, as we have been thrown so much together, and there are not many people—in the company, at least, I mean—with whom you seem to have much in common. I have always, as you will remember, Gerald, endeavoured to stop you when you were going to say anything definite to me; I have always refused to give you any definite answer, on the plea that it would be sufficient to ask me for one when you were in a position to speak seriously to me. Last night you told me that time had now arrived, and it is my duty therefore to speak definitely to you.

"Gerald, I cannot be your wife! I must not even be to you what I have been—a chosen companion, a woman in whose society you have been happy! In saying this I am not hard nor worldly. I have no doubt of your success in life, and I know that, should you continue to think as you do at present, your pleasure in that success would be doubled if it were shared by me. Should you continue to think? Ah, that is one point, Gerald! You have not seen enough of the world to know your own mind, and the woman whom

you worship now might seem very homely and very dull to you in a few years' time!

"But my chief reason for writing to you is to tell you that I am no longer free, that I have for some time been engaged to be married to a gentleman who now claims my promise. I ought to have told you this last night, Gerald, but I was overcome by the extra fatigue which I had undergone during the past week, and my dread of the annoyance which I knew my answer would give you was too much for me, so I write it to you instead! You must try and not think very badly of me for not telling you before. I had my reasons, reasons which I cannot explain now, but may be able to do so some day. I am going away from this at once, and am to be married very shortly. Good-bye, Gerald! God bless you! Most likely we shall never meet again, but I shall always think gratefully of the kindness that you have shown to me, and pray for your welfare. Once more, good-bye!

"Yours sincerely,

"MARGARET PIERREPOINT."

It was finished at last, after many alterations and much delay. As Madge read it over she said to herself, "This is doing evil that good may come of it; may God forgive me this bitter, bitter lie!" Then she folded the letter, addressed it, shut it in her blotting-book, and went into Rose's bedroom.

The sun had risen by this time and was pouring in through the thin white curtains. Madge stepped

softly up to the bed, and could not help noticing Rose's delicate beauty as she lay with her face upturned and her head resting on one of her arms.

"Too delicate and too sensitive to do much in the great battle of life," said Madge as she bent over her. "Poor little flower, it's lucky she has me to stand between her and the rough wind outside. Smiling in her sleep, too," she added, after a moment's pause; "it seems a shame to rouse her from a pleasant dream to the dull realities of packing and departure, but the time grows short, and we have much to do."

Then she touched her sister lightly on the shoulder, and the girl awoke and sat up in bed, looking before her with large eyes full of surprise.

"What is it, Madge?" she cried. "What has made you awake so early? I am generally up long before you; and your eyelids are all red and swollen too. I don't believe you have been to bed all night. What is the matter?"

"No, dear," said the elder sister quietly, "there is nothing the matter, only you must get up at once and pack your own things, and help me to pack mine; we are going away."

"Going away!" repeated Rose. "When?"

"Now directly, by the seven o'clock train. We have scarcely time for our packing and our breakfast."

"But where are we going to, Madge, and why?"

"I don't know yet, dear, where, though probably

we shall stop first at Springside; and as for why, Rose, the answer is, because I wish it."

Then Rose, who knew that when her sister was in what she was pleased to call "one of those tempers" there was no gainsaying her, promised to get up immediately, and Madge returned to her room, and began emptying her chest of drawers of its contents.

As she was in the midst of her packing, Miss Cave, who had been roused by the dragging about of the boxes, came in full of wonder and surprise at all she saw and heard. For Madge told the old lady a long story about her being not merely much fatigued, but more seriously out of health than she had imagined, adding, that Doctor Kent, whom she had consulted, had recommended her to try the mineral waters at Springside, and that she was about to proceed there with that object.

It was a great blow to Miss Cave to lose sight of her favourite, even for, as she imagined, a very short period, as she had fully calculated on their being together at Avonmouth. However, as the old lady remarked, an extra pound a week and half a clear benefit were good things in their way, but not to be compared to health, and Doctor Kent's opinion should be followed to the letter.

The packing was completed, the preparations for departure were all made, and they were standing on the platform just before the train started, when Madge handed to Miss Cave a letter, and requested that it might be sent round to Mr. Hardinge's lodging. Her

hand did not tremble in the slightest degree, nor was there in her face, which was closely scanned by the old lady, a trace of any unusual expression. Once resolved that the sacrifice was due from her, Madge went to the stake not merely with courage but with dignity.

CHAPTER IX.

Doubt.

WHEN Gerald Hardinge saw the street-door close, shutting Madge Pierrepont from his view, he remained stationary for a minute, gazing on the spot whence she had disappeared, and then turned away with an indescribable feeling of happiness and elation in his breast. Her last words to him had been but feebly uttered, it is true, and had told him that she was ill, but he believed this illness to be merely the result of mental excitement and physical prostration, which would speedily pass away, never to reappear in the calm happy future which he had planned for her, while the thrilling pressure of her hand, as she left him, gave higher hopes than could be given by any words that this future was accepted by her.

As the young man walked with a light quick step along the deserted streets, he lifted his hat to catch as much as possible of the cool night breeze, which retained some of the freshness of the sea, whence it was blown, mingled with the fragrance of the gardens and orchards which it had traversed in its career towards the old city, and raising his eyes to the star-strewn blue heavens above him, felt half inclined to believe that all nature gloried in his happiness, and shared in his success. Conscious presently of the

creeping, shambling female figure by his side, which addressed him in whining tones, imploring alms, he stopped and handed to it such largess as to evoke a shower of fulsome thanks from its recipient, who hurried away, fearful lest a second thought should make him repent of his munificence. Needless to say that no such thought crossed Gerald's mind. Not on such a night as that at least could he be appealed to in vain; he had himself been made supremely happy, and only delighted in doing what he could to increase the happiness of others.

Supremely happy indeed! The silence of the streets was almost oppressive to him. He wanted to take not man but nature into his confidence. He wanted to be alone in a garden, on a mountain top, in a boat upon the river or the sea, anywhere, so that without rendering himself ridiculous he could put into words the gratitude that filled his heart, the joy that thrilled his frame, and tingled in his pulses. Even there, in the Precinct, hemmed in by the high old gabled houses, inside of which the decorous dignitaries of the cathedral and their staid families lay wrapped in dreamless slumber, he felt inclined to cry aloud, to break into a swift running pace, to do anything which would give vent to the unspoken joy then pent within his breast.

It was lucky that he refrained from giving way to any of these eccentricities; for the next moment, as he turned the corner of the street, he found himself confronted by a group of men who were advancing from

the opposite direction. Scarcely gazing at them—assuredly not recognising any of them—Gerald was stepping into the roadway with the intention of allowing them to pass, when he heard his own name called out in a loud tone, and immediately recognised the voice pronouncing it as belonging to Mr. Dunsany. The speaker was indeed that histrionic genius, who followed up his salutation by seizing Gerald lightly by the collar, and, as he turned round to his admiring friends, calling out with tragic emphasis, “Trapped at last.”

“Trapped at last,” echoed a tall man, with a thin hatchet face, bright beady eyes, and a thick moustache. “Deuced good title for a three-act drama; see my way to it at once. Act the first, Setting the Snare; act the second, Knotting the Noose; act the third, Trapped at Last. Lapse of ten years is supposed to occur between the second and third acts. There you have it!”

“O, drop that gaff, Hayward,” said Dunsany; “and you, Gerald, don’t stand there looking like old Blowhard when he plays the Idiot Witness.”

“A part which comes quite natural to him,” interrupted Mr. Hayward.

“Well, come along, Gerald,” continued Dunsany; “we have got a little supper at the Swan, and I have been looking everywhere for you to make one of the party. Now I’ve got you, so come along.”

“Not to-night,” commenced Gerald; “I am awfully

tired, and was on my way home to bed. Not to-night, please."

"O, no, not to-night," repeated Dunsany in a bantering tone, "certainly not to-night; let us say we will meet this night twelvemonth, and at Philippi, please! Come out of that, you villain! Do you think I am going to let you go now I have once got hold of you? More especially when old Blowhard told me just now you were not coming back to him, and he should have to look out for a new scene-painter. Put your arm in mine, and come along."

"But I really am horribly tired," pleaded Gerald.

"If you are tired, Count" (the nickname which Gerald Hardinge's looks and manners had gained for him amongst the company, and by which he generally went), "if you are tired, Count," said another of the bystanders, Mr. Minneken, a dashing young *roué* of fifty-eight, with a purple head and a ragged purple moustache, and who was the light comedian of the company, "go to your bed at the natural hour of four A.M. Never invoke the miserable Morpheus at a time which should be sacred to the blisses of Bacchus and the kisses of Venus."

A general chorus of "Bravo, Minny!" rewarded this flight of fancy.

"Letting alone the fact that I sleep next to you, my dear Gerald," said Dunsany, "and that when I arrive at the hour so neatly indicated just now, I am likely to disturb you from your slumber."

The proposition to end his evening in this man-

ner was assuredly very different from what Gerald Hardinge had either expected or wished. He had longed for some place in which he could commune with himself, for some solitude where he could orally convince himself of the happiness which he had just secured; and he was now bidden to make one of a party of convivial roisterers in a tavern reeking with liquor and tobacco. But he did not like to urge any farther the refusal to the invitation thus pressed upon him. Several of those present, and especially Dunsany, had shown him much rough kindness and attention during the time he had passed among them, and he was conscious that there was prevalent in the company an intuitive suspicion of the difference between his former and his present position in life, which would render them doubly susceptible to any apparent slight. So he ceased to make any farther opposition to their wishes, and his assent being received with a shout which awoke the slumbering echoes of the old Guildhall portico, and brought the policeman down a by-street with hurried footsteps very different from his usual measured pace, the party proceeded on their way rejoicing.

The Swan, towards which the convivial company was making its way, was a regular type of a theatrical tavern. Ordinarily, the house "used" by the actors and their friends is to be found in the immediate vicinity of the theatre. But the inhabitants of Wexeter had scruples about allowing any establishment of the kind to flourish in the proximity of the cathedral;

while the church dignitaries, who were potential in such matters, took care that the precincts dwelt in by them should be kept free from the contamination of a tavern of any kind, and especially one which was likely to be frequented by the lower class of theatrical performers. So that the Swan was compelled to build her nest at some little distance off, down at the bottom of the hill indeed, and near the wharves abutting on the navigable portion of the river Wexe, where huge barks of timber lie strewn about, where the road is always gritty with coal-dust, and where there is a perpetual maritime smell of boiling pitch and fresh tar. None of the bargemen, Jacks-in-the-water, or river-side idlers, however, dream of going into the Swan, which is known as the actors' house of call, and is given up exclusively to them. The landlord is a retired "heavy man" from the Norfolk circuit; his wife, stout and unwieldy though she be now, was once the brightest of singing chambermaids at Portsmouth; and his two sons, with their celebrated dog Beppo, are now extracting money from the pockets of Australian diggers, by their splendid performance of the *Forest of Bondy*. All day long, lounging in front of the street-door, or leaning listlessly against the portal, are to be seen sallow, keen-eyed men, whiskerless, indeed, but with an outline blue map on cheek and chin, showing what tremendous hirsute power is kept in abeyance by the exigences of the profession. From time to time they will enter the house and drop into the bar—a snugger where not

one scrap of wall is to be seen, so covered is it with play-bills and placards, and portraits of celebrated theatrical characters—take a drink standing, chat with the barmaid, who, like every other inmate of the establishment, is steeped to the lips in dramatic lore, or glance through the pages of the *Haresfoot*, the theatrical journal, especially conning the advertisements of managers in quest of talent.

In the course of the theatrical season many banquets were usually given at the Swan, actors being proverbially of a hospitable and generous disposition; and no success of even the smallest kind was ever gained by any member of the company without its being duly commemorated in liquor. But there was never any noise or disturbance at these entertainments; and as the house was thoroughly well conducted, the police never interfered with its arrangements, and winked at occasional infractions of the law which prescribed a certain hour for closing.

That hour had pretty nearly arrived when Mr. Dunsany and his friends reached the Swan; and most of the ordinary guests had taken their departure. For the expected party, however, a room was prepared; and in a few minutes they were all seated round the table covered with the materials for a substantial meal. As the host, Mr. Dunsany took the chair, having Gerald on his right, and Mr. Minneken on his left. They were all too hungry to talk much at first; and, when their appetite began to be appeased, the conversation which ensued was such as might be expected

in such a circle. The performances of the evening and of the past season generally, the shortcomings, meannesses, and vanity of the manager Dobson (always spoken of as Blowhard), the chances of London engagements, and the gratitude due to the press, of which Mr. Hayward was the esteemed representative then present. All these subjects were in turn discussed; and Gerald, who had taken very little part in the conversation, thought he saw the longed-for opportunity to slip away unperceived, when he heard a remark which instantly changed his intention.

Mr. Minneken was the speaker.

"A divinity, sir," he exclaimed; "Madge Pierrepont is a divinity, nothing else. There is nothing to touch her on the stage nowadays, nor has there been in my time. I've seen them all, sir—the finest women in London, by George! and there is not one of them you can compare to our Madge. Such an arched neck, such pouting lips, such a mass of capillary attractions, such a magnificent mane. By heavens, sir, she is delicious!" And Mr. Minneken first kissed the tips of his fingers, and then waved them in the air.

When Gerald first heard the name of the woman he loved thus mentioned in a public company, he felt hot and angry. But it was impossible to be annoyed with Mr. Minneken, so earnest and impulsive was he, so chivalrous, and withal so respectful. Gerald recollected, moreover, that he had heard Madge speak of the kindness—which it was impossible to think of as

influenced by any ulterior motive—shown to her by the old beau on her first joining the company. But he feared that the subject might be taken up by others, who would not handle it quite so tenderly; and he was right.

“She is all very well to look at,” said Mr. Hayward; “what you call a fine woman, and that sort of thing; but she’s no actress.”

“No actress!” cried Dunsany.

“When did you find that out, Hayward?” asked Minneken.

“Ever since she refused to play the heroine in Hayward’s five-act tragedy of *Boadicea*,” said Gerald Hardinge. “Our friend has had no opinion of Miss Pierrepont’s talent since then.”

“Has Hayward written a five-act tragedy?” asked some one from the end of the table.

“I vote he stands a dinner, and reads it to us before it,” said Mr. Potts the prompter, who had been steadily eating ever since he arrived, and whose first utterance had reference to future food.

“No, no; after, after,” cried Dunsany. “If he read the tragedy first, none of us would be alive for the dinner.”

“Who was Boadicea?” asked Mr. Potts’s neighbour.

“Some Roman cove, I think,” said the prompter.

“It sounds to me like a name in the Bible,” said his neighbour.

"Can't say," said Mr. Potts, whose Biblical lore was limited.

"Well, I daresay you think all this is devilish funny," said Mr. Hayward, whose naturally sallow complexion seemed to be growing into a bright green; "but with all deference to that very excellent young gentleman over there, I repeat my opinion that Miss Pierrepont is no actress."

"By heavens, sir, how you can say that I cannot understand!" said Minneken, wisely stepping in to intercept the outbreak of wrath which he anticipated from Gerald Hardinge. "Don't even the benighted clodhoppers in this semi-agricultural, semi-ecclesiastical neighbourhood worship her? Don't they start at the smallest scintilla emitted by her glorious eye? Don't they follow every murmur of that deliciously soft voice, which comes to them through those rows of pearls like the sighing of the west wind over a summer sea? What more would you have, sir?"

"What more?" said Mr. Hayward savagely. "I would have a little more go; a little more life; a little more passion. You, Minneken, have a reputation of having seen a good deal of life, and you have lived long enough, heaven knows! but did you, in your experience, ever see a woman so cold and statuesque and passionless? Take her from first to last in all the love-scenes she plays, and tell me is there a scrap of heart, a scrap of warmth in one of them?"

Before Mr. Minneken could reply, a little man,

sitting midway down the table, said, with a low chuckling laugh:

"Perhaps she keeps her heart, and her warmth, and her passion, and all that, for private use. Don't do to parade 'em in public—O, no!"

The speaker was Mr. Snick, who was the "second old man" of the company, and who was generally regarded as having been allotted in life the same line of character which he had sustained all along in the theatre, namely, being sent on to make play for others, and only speaking in order to give other people the chance of reply. The expression by him of any original idea would have astonished the company; but such an opinion, emphasised as it was by him with his chuckle, caused intense surprise; and a short silence ensued, which was broken by Gerald Hardinge, who inquired, in rather a savage tone, what grounds Mr. Snick had for his statement.

To find the old man's remark taken seriously, delighted the company in general; and Mr. Potts's neighbour, who had made the inquiry about Boadicea, rising to his feet, said gravely, "That he thought their friends would agree with him that no gentleman had a right to ask any questions about Mr. Snick's little love-affairs."

The applause and laughter which greeted this remark incensed Gerald Hardinge still farther. His cheeks flushed and his eyes sparkled as he rose from his chair, and said hurriedly:

"I care nothing about Mr. Snick, or his love-affairs

either; but he alluded to a lady, whose acquaintance I have the pleasure of possessing, in an offensive way, and with a certain innuendo in his manner which I think demands explanation."

Some of the company cried "Hear!" some, "Bosh!" and Mr. Dunsany called out, at the top of his voice, "Come, Snick, you innuendoing vagabond, make a clean breast of it, and explain!"

Mr. Snick did not seem in the smallest degree put out by the hubbub and excitement he had created. On the contrary, he sat quietly sucking away at his long pipe; and when thus directly appealed to by Mr. Dunsany, he indulged in a few more chuckles before he remarked:

"What I said I will stick to. Only when I spoke before I said perhaps she kept her warmth and her passion for private use; now I say there is no perhaps at all about it—I am sure she does."

"Sure! How the devil can you be sure?" asked Mr. Hayward, looking across at him with a glance in which surprise was mingled with contempt.

"How can I be sure?" said the little man, with another chuckle. "Why, from what you call in your newspaper language ocular demonstration. I have seen her."

"Seen your grandmother!" roared out Mr. Dunsany, not liking the expression on Gerald Hardinge's face, and wishing to put an end to the discussion as quickly as possible. "Come out of that, Snick, and don't let's have any of your anecdotes!"

"Not at all!" cried out Gerald Hardinge, starting to his feet. "Mr. Snick, coming out of the region of possibility, has now made a positive statement respecting Miss Pierrepont, and I demand that he now enters fully into detail concerning what he alleges he saw."

"What right have you to demand anything of the kind?" asked Mr. Hayward.

"I will answer that question by and by," said Gerald Hardinge very quietly.

"O, sit down, Gerald, and don't be bothering about an old omadhoun like that Snick," said Mr. Dunsany. "Sure, in addition to being always moithered, he has got about a pint of punch under his belt now, and is half drunk already!"

But Gerald Hardinge was deaf to all such entreaty; the accusation, he said, had been made, and must be given in detail. The others, by degrees, came round to this opinion, and even Mr. Dunsany said, in a half-jocular, half-savage manner:

"Come, Snick, down on your marrow-bones, and confess your peccadillo, and I'll promise you absolution."

The various stages of these proceedings seemed fraught with the greatest delight to Mr. Snick, who still sat calmly sucking at his pipe, and chuckling after the emission of every separate whiff; and when he was at length called upon to speak, he spoke slowly and deliberately, but without the smallest hesitation.

"Some of you may know," he said, "and some mayn't, that owing to the screw I get from old Blowhard not being too magnificent, I endeavour to earn a little money by acting as agent for the sale of mineral waters and ginger-beer. There may be some among the company present," said the little man, looking round him with a leer and a chuckle, "who may have had soda-water from me which they have not paid for, and there may not. But that's neither here nor there. What I am coming to is this, that a few nights ago, it might be, I cannot say the exact day, but you will recollect it by that tremendous thunder-storm which we had, the only one there has been this summer, I thought to myself that, not being in the bill that night, I would just walk up as far as Dumpington turnpike, where the tollman owed me a small account for ginger-beer, which he manages to sell a good deal of, it being good stuff, and not like the penny bottles, all pop and froth. Accordingly, soon after it was dusk, I strolled out there, and smoked a pipe with the tollman, and got the money from him, and set off to come back. I hadn't gone a hundred yards before I saw—it was a dark night, but I've got eyes like a cat—I saw a tall woman coming towards me, and I recognised her figure in a minute as Miss Pierrepont. 'What are you doing here, my lady, at this time of night?' says I to myself. 'I may as well see,' I says to myself, and with that I slipped into the hedge. She passed me so close that her dress almost brushed against me, and then I set out

after her. She went along the road, and passed the turnpike, and up that narrow lane, which, as some of you may know, runs by it. There she waited, walking up and down, as though expecting some one. I had hidden myself in another hedge, and was looking on, and presently I heard a heavy footstep, and I saw a tall man approaching. She walked straight up to meet him, and he stooped down, and put his arms around her, and kissed her. That's what he did!"

And having made his point, the little man looked round to see the result.

Mr. Snick had expected, on reaching his climax, he would have been hailed with a shout of delight from his audience, but there was no such outburst. On the contrary, a feeling of awkwardness seemed to prevail among them, and, after looking stealthily at each other, they, with one accord, glanced towards Gerald Hardinge. The expression on Mr. Dunsany's face was especially anxious, and when Mr. Snick stopped speaking, Gerald felt his knee clasped by his friend's hand, in protest against any outbreak on his part.

The young man, however, needed no such warning. His lips twitched a little when Mr. Snick made his point, but all sign of emotion had passed away as he asked:

"The night was dark, and I think you say you did not recognise the gentleman's face?"

"No," said Mr. Snick; "I could only see that he was a tall man."

"The darkness must have deceived you in that respect too," said Gerald, with an attempt at a smile, "for," turning to the company, "I cannot be considered tall, and yet I was the man who met Miss Pierrepont on the night in question, when this estimable gentleman was good enough to play the spy upon our actions."

"You!" cried Mr. Snick.

"You!" cried Mr. Hayward.

"You!" echoed Mr. Potts the prompter. "You been kissing and making love to our leading lady?"

"Yes," said Gerald Hardinge; "yes, Mr. Potts, and making love to her successfully, I am happy to say, for Miss Pierrepont is now my affianced wife."

CHAPTER X.

Despair.

THE silence which fell upon the company at Gerald Hardinge's unexpected announcement was broken by Mr. Dunsany, who called out in his most melodious tones:

"My dear Gerald, I am delighted that you have thought the time has arrived when it is expedient to make this announcement, to the public as it were. When, weeks ago, you first mentioned to me, as your intimate friend, the fact of your engagement with Miss Pierrepont, I told you, if you recollect, that it would be advisable to make your friends acquainted, as speedily as possible, with the exact position of affairs, in order that there might be no possible misunderstanding. And you will acknowledge I was right, for I am sure if our friend Hayward had known how matters had stood he would not have hinted a doubt as to Miss Pierrepont's ability; while as to Snick—"

"I beg your pardon, Dunsany," said Mr. Hayward, "I said nothing about Miss Pierrepont's appearance or conduct, of both of which I have the highest admiration; but I cannot allow that even the great fact of her marrying the Count here is likely to endow

her with ability, or to render her a modern Mrs. Siddons."

"Perhaps it will be advisable to change the subject," said Gerald Hardinge haughtily. "After the announcement that I have made, it is perhaps scarcely in good taste to discuss Miss Pierrepont's qualities or qualifications in my presence. The restriction, however, need be but very temporary, as I am about to take my departure; the season is broken up," continued he, rising from his chair, "and this will be the last time of our meeting; but I hope at some future period, gentlemen, to renew the pleasant impressions which I have had during my companionship with you, and to come amongst you once again."

"And bring your wife," suggested Mr. Snick, who, since the conclusion of his story, had remained perfectly quiet, sucking away at his pipe with great enjoyment.

"And bring my wife, sir!" echoed Gerald angrily. He would have said more, but for the warning pressure of Dunsany's foot. As it was, he merely bowed and left the room, amidst general cheering and expressions of good wishes.

When Gerald Hardinge left the tavern, with his brain on fire and his heart aching within him, he felt the necessity for solitude and self-examination; and accordingly skirting the wharves on the edge of the Wexe, and crossing by the lower railway station, made the best of his way to the gardens of North-Hedge. These gardens, given up during the day to nurse-

maids and their charges, and to feeble valetudinarians of both sexes, who, screened by large banks of greenery from the cutting winds, sit idly watching the railway traffic beneath them, are closed at sundown, and supposed to be deserted during the night. In the earlier days, however, of his sojourn at Wexeter, Gerald had often used them as a short cut from one part of the town to the other; and recollecting a gate which could be scaled with tolerable ease, he proceeded to climb it, and speedily flung himself down on one of the benches which nestle under the avenue of broad elms intersecting the garden. The business carried on at the railway station at Wexeter has apparently been affected by the general quietude of the place; there are but two passenger trains during the night, and the goods traffic is very limited, so that the station upon which Gerald Hardinge was looking down lay hushed in repose, and, save by the sighing of the night-winds through the trees, the silence around him was unbroken.

This was as he wished it. The thoughts which racked him might be too deep for concealment, and he would have had no human eye to play the spy upon such consequences as would result from his contemplated analysis of his own feelings, and the determination which he would then arrive at. To stop a ribald laugh, to controvert the effect of a sneer upon a woman whom he had loved, he had in the heat of the moment publicly assumed a position, the retention or resignation of which, fraught with the deepest in-

terest as it would be on his future life, must be determined upon at once.

A woman whom he had loved! Was he, then, to think of as past and bygone that passion which thrilled his soul and tingled in his veins, when he held Madge in his arms but a few short hours previously; as faded and vanished that love-lit light which had cast its glamour over the ordinary occurrences of every-day life, and steeped them all in roseate hues? Was the temple of his love so fairy a fabric that at an idle or a lying word uttered by a gossip it should suddenly collapse, burying in its ruins the idol which he had set up therein and worshipped so tenderly? An idle or lying word? No, to the tale told by that wretched old man neither of these terms could be applied.

Alas! what Gerald did know tallied completely with what Mr. Snick had said. It was on the night of the thunder-storm that he had called at Madge Pierrepont's lodging, and found her absent, attending, as her sister Rose had told him, to a business engagement. He recollected how he had waited for her, patiently walking up and down the street, heedless of the raging elements, and how he had seen her return at a late hour. He recollected how he had accused her the next day of having been to meet some man, and how, without positively denying it, she had put aside the question in her soothing way. And all that time, while he was waiting for her in the storm, not even with a hope of speaking to her, and going away as it might be almost contented when he had seen her

safely shut within her own door, she had been to meet another man, who "stooped and put his arms round her and kissed her"! Gerald remembered the exact words which Mr. Snick had used, and cursed him aloud for using them.

And yet, in the full knowledge of her treachery and deceit, he had acknowledged her before them as his affianced wife! His affianced wife! That was the position that he had publicly declared her to hold; that was the position that she actually held; for from her manner that evening, her last words, her parting touch, Gerald had but little doubt as to Madge's answer to his appeal. His affianced wife! who went to meet another man in secret, and refused to give him, who would have died for her, any account of her proceedings on that eventful evening.

Now what was he to do? The idea of withdrawing the proposal which he had made, of breaking away from the compact which, as he imagined, was virtually agreed upon between them, never entered into Gerald's mind. What he had said to Madge Pierrepont was, according to his view, quite sufficient in itself to bind him, without taking into consideration the quasi-public announcement which he had made. And this act of hers—the meeting with this unknown man—took place before he had actually proposed to her, and while she was yet a free agent. What was he to do? He must go through with it, carrying the burden which he had laid upon his own shoulders as best he might. He would see Madge

the first thing in the morning, tell her exactly what had occurred, repeat the story as it had been told to him, and ask her what she had to say in her defence. She would be truthful in her reply—he had an innate conviction of that—and then he should know what to decide. If she acknowledged that there was a foundation for Mr. Snick's story—and it seemed impossible to think that anything so circumstantial could be the work of mere invention—where would be that happiness in the future which he had so joyfully pictured to himself?

He would keep his word; she should have nothing to complain of on that score: he would marry her, and take her away with him to London; but as to living with her, that could never be. If she had deceived him then, with what confidence could he trust his honour to her keeping when surrounded by flatterers and tried by temptation! No; that is the only course open to him, and the one that he must follow, provided always that their manner of living can be kept a secret from the world. If the secret of his betrayed trust, of his blighted life, were once known, Gerald felt that the exposure would kill him. Those were the only terms he would exact from Madge: that it should be a life-long secret between them, and so long as she kept to them, she should share his income, and be left to do as she pleased. And having settled this in his own mind, Gerald rose from his seat, and made the best of his way home.

When he arrived at his lodging, he let himself in

with his key, and was proceeding straight to bed, when, thinking he saw a light in the sitting-room occupied conjointly by himself and Mr. Dunsany, he opened the door, and discovered that worthy stretched at full length on the sofa, and snoring in a remarkably resonant manner. Gerald was about to retire quietly, when a snore of extra power awoke the sleeper, and Mr. Dunsany, rubbing his eyes, sat upright, apparently considerably refreshed by his slumber.

"Come in, Gerald," he cried; "and don't be after scuttling off to bed like that, when I have been sitting up here broad awake, and denying myself natural sleep, for the chance of a talk to you. I went straight to your room directly I got back; and, finding you were not there, I determined to sit up on the chance of catching you before you turned in, as I have something very important to say to you."

"Say away, then," said Gerald, throwing himself listlessly into a chair, and plunging his hands into his pockets; "say away; I'm listening."

"Listening!" echoed Mr. Dunsany, who had gone to a little sideboard, and placed some bottles and glasses on the table. "But I want you to talk as well; and, with a view to that, hadn't you better put a pipe in your mouth? I have no hopes of improving your accent, which is essentially English and bad; but tobacco is a great tranquilliser, and brings out the philosophy in a man's nature; and that is a quality of which you have decidedly no superfluity."

"It is a quality which all of us require more or less," said Gerald; "and most of us more."

"Don't be sneering, and going in for the Diogenes business, my dear Gerald," said Mr. Dunsany, who, meanwhile, had mixed himself a tumbler of grog, and lighted a large pipe; "it's not natural to you, I know; but you are upset and worried just now."

"I am utterly miserable, Dunsany," said Gerald with a groan.

"Don't say that, my dear lad, for heaven's sake!" cried his friend. "I've made a good many blunders in my time; but I never made a greater than when I persuaded you to come to that confounded supper to-night, or when I permitted that preposterous old idiot Snick to tell that cock-and-bull story."

Gerald raised his head, and looked up earnestly.

"You don't believe that story?" he asked.

"Which part of it?" asked Mr. Dunsany.

"Any part," said Gerald.

"Which part would you wish me to believe?" asked Mr. Dunsany. "I am open to conviction, my dear lad, and I will oblige you to the best of my ability."

"Don't be fooling, Dunsany! It is scarcely a subject for jest. Give me a plain answer, if you can."

"My dear Gerald, the question is rather a complicated and a delicate one, and I wanted to deal with it as delicately as I could. It resolves itself into this: do I believe that a certain lady, a common acquaintance

of ours, went on a certain evening, memorable as the occasion of the thunder-storm, up the Dumpington-road, and, in a lane near the turnpike, was met and embraced by a gentleman? Is that the question, or, rather, one of the questions?"

"It is."

"Well, then, upon my honour, I do believe it! In the first place, I do not think that old Snick has the power of inventing anything at all, much less anything so circumstantial as that story was in its details of ginger-beer, turnpike, tollman, and all the rest of it; and, in the next place, I have noticed, for the last few days, a certain absence of mind and preoccupation of manner in the lady in question. Now, as to the other part of it: do I believe that one Gerald Hardinge was the gentleman who met the lady in the lane near the Dumpington turnpike? Upon my conscience, I do not. Now, am I right?"

"So far as I am concerned, you are quite right," said Gerald, with a heavy sigh.

"Exactly," cried Mr. Dunsany; "and it was a fine manly thing of you to dash in as you did, my dear lad, and endeavour to save a lady's character, which was being roughly handled. Only, like most other spirited and inexperienced persons, you went too far, and you proved too much. Why the deuce couldn't you content yourself with vindicating Miss Pierrepont's character, without asserting that she is your affianced wife?"

"I said so because it is the fact," said Gerald quietly.

"The devil it is!" cried Mr. Dunsany with a long whistle; adding, after a little pause, "that quite alters the case. You should have told me that before you asked me my opinion."

"It was scarcely a subject you would have expected me to joke upon," said Gerald.

"No," said Dunsany, "not to joke; but when a point is stretched here it may easily be stretched there. However, it's no use for us to be beating about the bush in this way. You say you are utterly miserable. I have been your chum as yet, and, as a man who is older than you, and has had much more experience of the world, I want to see what can be done to help you."

"Nothing can be done," said Gerald moodily; "nothing."

"Bah, nothing!" said Mr. Dunsany. "Now let us see how the land lies. You say you are engaged to Miss Pierrepont?"

"Well, not exactly engaged. I have asked her to become my wife."

"And she has not replied?"

"Not exactly."

"Faith, that's a fine sort of engagement," said Mr. Dunsany; "like my countrymen's reciprocity, all on one side."

"What I mean is, she has not replied in so many

words," said Gerald; "but there is no doubt of her understanding the offer I made her, and of her accepting it—unfortunately."

"And why unfortunately?"

"Do you ask me that after having heard Mr. Snick's story?"

"To the devil with Mr. Snick and his story," said Mr. Dunsany. "When did you lay your title and lands at Miss Pierrepont's feet?"

"I asked her to become my wife to-night, not half an hour before I met you."

"To-night!" echoed Mr. Dunsany. "And you are grizzling your head off because she chose to meet somebody a few nights ago."

"But she knew that I was fond of her then," pleaded Gerald.

"Knew that you were fond of her! A young lady of her beauty and powers of fascination must know that there are hundreds of men who are fond of her, but she cannot be expected to reserve her hand for any one in particular, unless he asks for it."

"No, certainly, but—"

"But me no buts, as I have no doubt Hayward says in his five-act tragedy, which Miss Pierrepont would not play. Seriously, Gerald, you are making a donkey of yourself. Instead of being ready to jump out of your skin with delight at the fact of being about to be married to one of the prettiest and cleverest young women possibly to be met with, you are crooning over a cock-and-bull story of her having met some

one else some time before you did her the honour to propose to her."

"There is something in what you say," said Gerald, brightening a little.

"Something! There is more than you will ever be able to compass, unless your mind expands a great deal, and that's not likely now that you are going away from us, and you will lose the chance of my tuition. Besides, take my word for it, that meeting was not exactly as it was represented by that old Snick, who is a malevolent little wretch, and would put the worst construction on anything. Even you must have sense enough to see that Miss Pierrepont is not the sort of woman likely to allow herself to be mixed up in any compromising affair."

"I am afraid there is no question about the meeting," said Gerald doubtfully.

"No," said Dunsany; "but granted that a meeting took place, the whole force of it, for good or for evil, depends upon the person whom she met."

"It was a man," said Gerald.

"No doubt," said Dunsany; "even Snick is not idiot enough to make a mistake in that. But, as I said before, Miss Pierrepont is not the sort of person to make promiscuous assignations, and you may take your oath that this man was her father, her brother, or something of that kind."

"She never spoke to me of any of her relations, except the sister who lives with her," said Gerald.

"The very reason why she would be more likely

to meet them in secret," said Dunsany. "When you have known a little more of the profession, my dear Gerald, you will find there are numbers of persons in it, especially the female members, who have relations whom they are very shy of noticing in public. Thus, for instance, Miss Montmorency has picked up a bit of education here and there, has a fine figure and a good voice, and is leading lady on the Worcester circuit; while her papa, who is not called Montmorency at all, but Glubb, keeps a small shop or shed in the New Cut. Her line is light comedy, his is onions and coke. Depend upon it, something of that sort is the case in this instance, and you will be very good friends with the old gentleman some day, and let him supply the Wallsends when you settle in town."

"Snick said it was a tall man," said Gerald.

"There is no particular reason that I know of why a father should not be tall," said Dunsany, "though most of them do run short and broad. However, this might be the brother, the *Wife's Secret* business. You recollect the play? A brother who has come to grief, and is in hiding, and comes to visit his sister secretly, and is suspected by the husband to be her lover. Just our story, by George! Perhaps Miss Pierrepont's brother has come to grief, frisked the till, or climbed up behind somebody's back on a bill-stamp, or some ingenious little proceeding of that nature, and is keeping out of the way. Depend upon it, it is something of that kind. Now finish your grog, and get off to

bed easy in your mind; you are sure to find it all right in the morning."

"I shall go round and call upon her the first thing," said Gerald.

"Do," said Mr. Dunsany. "So long as you have a good sleep to-night you may do what you please to-morrow. Well," he muttered to himself, looking after the young man's departing figure, "I hope I'm right; I do not think the girl is the sort to play double, particularly with such a frank, honest nature as his. But, even if it comes to the worst, I have postponed his misery twelve hours, and it was worth while sitting up a little later and drinking an extra glass of grog to do that."

"And what is the matter with my Susan?" said Mr. Dunsany, coming down to breakfast the next morning and meeting Miss Cave on the staircase. "Has she come to say that she can conceal her passion for her Mike no longer? And has she a carriage and four outside waiting to convey him to the village church?"

"Get along with you, do, Dunsany," said Miss Cave, grinning. "I was not looking for you, but for Mr. Hardinge."

"As I tapped at Mr. Hardinge's door just now, he roared out that he was in his bath," said Dunsany; "consequently he is not in a position to meet my Susan's gaze."

"Well, then, I will give this letter to you to take

to him. It's from Miss Pierrepont, and important I am sure, because she begged me to bring it to him myself."

"Right you are," said Dunsany. And he took the letter to Gerald, whom he found in his dressing-gown. Gerald turned very pale when he saw the writing.

"It's from Madge," he said.

"I know it," said Dunsany. "Miss Cave told me; open it now. It's all right, depend upon it."

Gerald opened the letter and read it through. Then tossing it to his friend, he fell back in his chair, and buried his face in his hands.

"My poor dear fellow, what can be the matter?" said Dunsany. Then casting his eye over the letter, added, "By George! old Snick was right after all."

END OF BOOK THE FIRST.

BOOK THE SECOND.

CHAPTER I.

In the Bungalow.

TIME out of mind has Springside been the chosen resort of retired Indian officers, and of those civilians who, in the happy days when the pagoda-tree was easier to shake, and more productive in its droppings than at present, were enabled, after a comparatively short number of years spent in the East, to return to England, and settle down in comfort for the remainder of their lives in more than easy circumstances. Men of both classes, with their families, were to be found as settlers at Swelteringham, at Teemington, at Narrowgate, and at other spa-possessing places of the same class, which London physicians of repute had an interest in recommending to their patients. But neither as regards the number nor the social status of their visitors, or their residents, could any of them be compared to Springside. The waters, after all had been said, were not the real attraction of the place. They had their merits, no doubt; they were to the full as nasty as those of any other spa, and, as another advantage, the springs were more numerous, thus affording different degrees of nastiness. Their medicinal

virtues were no greater and no less than those of their rivals. Taken internally, or externally in baths which had the advantage of being larger and handsomer than those of any other place, they effected a certain number of real cures, and imbued hundreds of estimable persons with the belief, that by drinking or bathing in them a vast amount of good had been achieved, a result which the most skilful physician would not hope to improve upon.

No, the real attraction of Springside was the society, and the inhabitants knew this, and were proud of it. What is Swelteringham? they would say; all very well in its way; very decent place for the country families and clodpole aristocracy of Costershire to visit, and certainly possessing one or two springs, which may or may not be good, but a mere new-fangled mushroom place just sprung into existence, and compelled to add to its attractions with the College for boys, and a Pittville, with fireworks and out-door amusements! Look at Teemington, only fit to live in during the winter, and then almost insupportable from the crowd of hunting-men who swarm in every hotel and lodging-house, and fill the air with their stable talk; look at Narrowgate, crammed with broad-shouldered men from Huddersfield, and fat women from Halifax—and then look at us! We are just the same as we were a hundred years ago; our city has not altered; it is just the same as it was when Beau Pash was its king, and when Sheridan flirted with Miss Linley in Bilsom-street. We have races at the proper time, but we are

not overdone with turfites, and we should like to catch any excursionists or "trippers" from the manufacturing towns in our precincts. Our residents have been amongst us for generations, our visitors are people of position and family, and those retired Indians who have made Springside their home are not like the Indian settlers in the other places we have mentioned, who have made money anyhow, but Staff Officers in the Company's service, proprietors who have a star or two against their names in the books at Leadenhall-street, men who had the entrée of Government House, or were well known at the Byculla Club.

So far as their remarks about their Indian settlers were concerned, the Springside people were decidedly right. All the best men of the day, both in the military and civil service, who had either finally retired or were spending their furlough at home, made Springside their head-quarters, and rarely left it save for a few weeks in the London season, when they established themselves in lodgings in the vicinity of the Oriental or the military clubs. The Springside Club, held in those days in the large rooms over the post-office, had amongst its members a majority of Qui-his, testy old gentlemen, who were horribly irritated by the noise made in stamping the letters underneath, or by the rattling of the mail-carts outside. The bachelors lived in hotels and boarding-houses, the married men, who were in the minority, had houses of their own, or lived in stately old lodgings, which, whatever the Springsideites might say, were now in the days of their de-

cadence, and had quite a flavour of powder and peruke about them, reminding one of their former glories.

Unmarried, indeed, but with a house of his own, which, for want of a better name, he has called the Bungalow, and which stands in the midst of a square trim garden, invariably spoken of by him as the compound, is our old friend Captain Cleethorpe. The stout Major of the Cheddar yeomanry lies in Cheeseborough churchyard, and Captain Cleethorpe has succeeded to his rank, but the old familiar title seems to suit him best, and he is, at Springside at all events, generally addressed by it. Five years have passed away since the occurrence of that unhappy quarrel in the billiard-room of the George, but they have effected little alteration in the Captain's appearance. His face is impressed with a few more lines, his hair is thinner, and what remains of it is a little grizzled; but his figure is still smart and soldier-like, and on horseback or on foot, he is as active as ever. See him now, on this bright evening in early autumn, standing in his dining-room, the large French windows of which open out upon the close-shaven lawn, carefully uncorking two or three bottles of prime wine, which he has just brought up from the cellar, in honour of the arrival on a visit of his old comrade, Captain Norman. See him now, with his bright eyes, his trim moustache, his long brown thorough-bred hands, well cut light gray suit, neat boots, and unmistakable air of ease, and you will acknowledge that there is no better-looking fifty-year-old to be found in the country.

"Well, Cooke," he says, as his tall, strapping, red-haired, soldier-servant appears at the door, "has the Captain got everything he wanted up-stairs?"

"Yes, sir," said the man; "the Captain wants to know whether it is full dress to-night, sir, or not?"

"Full dress?" echoes Cleethorpe, laughing. "Of course not; tell him there are no ladies coming, and that he and I will be alone at dinner, and that he can put on his shooting-jacket and slippers, or whatever he feels most comfortable in."

"Right, sir," replies Cooke, and away he goes.

"Jack will be glad of that," thinks Captain Cleethorpe to himself when he is alone again; "evening dress must be as bad as a suit of armour to him now. What an enormous size he has grown! But he seems just the same simple-hearted, dear old fellow that he has been ever since I have known him."

Farther meditation is put an end to by the entrance of Captain Norman. As his old comrade had remarked, the Captain had grown enormously stout. Looking at his double chin and slow ponderous gait, one could hardly recognise in him the handsome light dragoon who made so favourable an impression when told off on escort duty, and whose good looks and splendid horsemanship, when acting as "galloper" to the general commanding on a field-day at Aldershot, won the heart, hand, and fortune of the lady who was now his wife.

Dinner concluded, and the good wine duly honoured and attended to, the gentlemen took their cigars into

the garden, where the table, with coffee, &c., had already been prepared for them.

"That's about the pattern to suit you, Jack," said Cleethorpe, pointing to an enormous bamboo seat, half chair, half sofa; "put your manly form into that, and make yourself comfortable."

"Right you are," said Captain Norman, following his friend's advice. "I have seen one of these machines before, on board a P. and O. boat, when I went to see some friends off from Southampton, I think."

"Yes," said Cleethorpe; "I brought it home with me from India."

"You must have pleasant associations with India, I should think, Cleethorpe," said Captain Norman, stretching himself lazily. "You call your house the Bungalow, I see."

"Well, yes," said Cleethorpe; "a man who has been much out there never entirely rids himself from its associations, more especially if his lines of life be cast in such a place as this. Here we have a perfect eastern colony, eat Anglo-Indian dishes, talk Anglo-Indian slang, and look out more eagerly for our fortnightly batch of the *Calcutta Englishman* than for our daily *Times*."

"Ah," said Captain Norman, with a yawn, "rather dull, isn't it? Dreary old birds most of them, I should say."

"Well, they would not be lively to you," said Cleethorpe, laughing, "while just in the same way your county magnates, with their airs, and your bucolic

friends, with their dissertations on mangolds and swedes, would be insupportable to me. However, we are likely to have a pleasant addition to our set; a charming place in this neighbourhood has just been bought by a man whom you know, I think; or, at all events, of whom you have heard me speak."

"Who is that?"

"Sir Geoffry Heriot; the father of that young fellow who was in our regiment, and who had a row in the billiard-room, you recollect?"

"I recollect! I should think I did."

"Well: I had a letter from Goole, our colonel, you know, yesterday morning, telling me that Sir Geoffry, unable to endure his solitary life any longer, had sold his place in the country, and knowing that there were sure to be many of his old comrades, and people with whose lives and tastes he had some affinity, about here, had bought a lovely little box within two miles of this, where old General Chowder died a month ago. Goole asks me to call upon Sir Geoffry, and do the civil to him, but, beyond that, he intrusts me with a commission; he wants me to get Sir Geoffry a housekeeper."

"A housekeeper!" echoed Captain Norman, lazily. "Then the old boy has never married again?"

"Not he; from my recollection of what Goole told me of his married life, he has acted on the 'once bit twice shy' principle."

"And do you know any nice motherly old woman whom you could recommend to look after the General's

socks, and make his jams, and rob him herself, instead of letting the tradespeople rob him?"

Cleethorpe looked at his friend in admiration. "Certainly marriage has developed you amazingly in every way, Jack!" he said. "It must be your domestic experience that enables you to give so accurate a description of the housekeeper's duties. I certainly do know a lady who is neither old nor motherly, but who is decidedly nice, and whom I thought of recommending to Sir Geoffry Heriot, though I doubt whether she could fulfil all the functions which you have enumerated."

"And who is she—a protégée of yours?"

"No, indeed, I know comparatively little of her."

"Maid, wife, or widow?"

"A widow of the name of Pickering; her husband had held a very inferior position in some government office I believe, and when she came here after his death, some three years ago, she had an idea of seeking employment as a nursery governess, or companion to a lady, or something of that kind. But the reaction consequent upon the fatigues of nursing him in his last illness, so I understood, was too much for her; she fell ill herself, and would have died had it not been for the devoted manner in which she was nursed by a young sister, who accompanied her, and the kindness which she received from our parson and his wife."

"And his wife!" echoed Captain Norman. "Mrs. Pickering, then, is rather plain, I take it."

"Another observation springing from your domestic experience," said Cleethorpe; "but this time you are wrong. Mrs. Pickering is a remarkably handsome woman."

"And the parson and his wife attended to her in her illness?"

"Not merely that. During this illness they discovered that she was miserably poor; that her husband had left her no pension, no life insurance, absolutely nothing at all; that both she and her sister were quick and intelligent, and willing to do anything, no matter how laborious or how poorly paid, to earn their livelihood."

"Poor creatures, how very creditable!" said Captain Norman, placidly sipping his glass of curaçoa.

"Well, our parson—Drage his name is, Onesiphorus Drage, queer name, isn't it?—is the son of a man who is a great gun in the City, director of banks, and all sorts of things, and, amongst others, of one of the telegraph companies. Drage wrote up to his father, and the old man offered to have them put into the telegraph office in London, but somehow or other Mrs. Pickering had a great objection to that, and so it ended in both of them being made clerks in the branch office down here. They got on wonderfully, especially the younger one, who displayed such singular ability that, when an important vacancy occurred in the head office in London, they offered her the berth, and as the salary and chances were really good, and they found a respectable person for her to live with,

Mrs. Pickering made no farther objection, and about a year ago the girl went to town, and there she remains.

"And what became of Mrs. Pickering?"

"Well, just before that, Mrs. Drage was taken ill and died, and on her death-bed she spoke to Mrs. Pickering, who had attended her throughout, and implored her to be a mother to the little girl whom she was leaving."

"Ah, ha!" said Captain Norman, "which means also to be a wife to the reverend old—what you call him."

"Not at all. The Reverend Onesiphorus, who is delicate on his chest, has been away for the last twelve months, yachting with his father in the Mediterranean, and left his flock in charge of his curate, while Mrs. Pickering, relieved of her telegraphic duties, has been living at the rectory, and educating and taking care of little Bertha."

"And when does the parson come back?" asked Captain Norman.

"Mrs. Pickering expected him the night before last, and cleared out into her old lodging to give him possession."

"And you propose to make Mrs. Pickering old Heriot's housekeeper?" asked Norman.

"Exactly."

"Then you are doing a decidedly unhandsome thing, Cleethorpe, and outraging the laws of nature and three-volume novels."

"What do you mean?"

"Why of course this parson ought to come back full of gratitude and all that sort of thing, and ought to marry the telegraph woman, and live happy ever after."

"Yes," said Cleethorpe, "perhaps so; but then you see, Jack, you don't know Mrs. Pickering."

"No, and I don't know the parson, for the matter of that."

"You will have that felicity presently, for I asked him to come up here this evening to hear about my proposition. No, Drage is not a young man, nor scarcely what you could call a lady-killer, but he is young enough to set the world talking if such a woman as Mrs. Pickering were to become his house-keeper; whereas with such a tough old bamboo-cane as Sir Geoffry Heriot, the veriest Mrs. Grundy in Springside, and there are some good specimens of the breed amongst them, I can tell you, could find no opportunity for scandal."

"Hem," said Captain Norman; "my experience of women is, that when they give their minds to it, there is nobody and nothing that they could not contrive to say something disagreeable about. By the way, what became of Sir Geoffry's son, after the row with that great hulking brute, whose name I forget?"

"No one ever heard anything about him," said Cleethorpe. "I have asked Goole more than once but could get no tidings of the lad. He told me that he received a polite but formal acknowledgment of a

letter, which he thought it his duty to write to Sir Geoffry after the row, and that when once, on the first occasion of their meeting afterwards, he was beginning to allude to the circumstances, the old man stopped him by saying, 'I have no son now, sir; you will oblige me by never mentioning his name again.' Goole and Sir Geoffry have met several times since then, and are, I believe, rather intimate, as indeed this letter proves, but the subject has never been touched upon by either of them."

"It was a queer business, that funking of his, and one which I could never understand, for, from the little I saw of him, the lad seemed to have plenty of pluck."

"He was a nice boy," said Cleethorpe. "I think of him very often, always when his father is named; this letter brought all the circumstances fresh into my mind, and only yesterday morning I was wondering what had become of him."

"Taken the queen's shilling, perhaps," said Norman, "or gone out to Australia."

"No," said Cleethorpe, reflectively; "he struck me as more likely to fall on his feet in a better way than that. He was the sort of lad that people would take a fancy to, scarcely knowing why they did so."

"By Jove!" interrupted Captain Norman, striking his fist upon the table with such violence as to make the cups and glasses ring, "I have got it at last."

"So had I, very nearly," said Captain Cleethorpe,

moving out of the way of some dripping coffee, "and hot too; but what is it that you have got, Jack?"

"An idea," said Captain Norman.

"Keep it, book it, and register it at once as 'Norman's patent,' or no one will ever believe you came by it honestly," said Cleethorpe.

"Don't you be funny, but listen," said his friend. "Do you know what it is to be haunted by a face?"

"I did," said Cleethorpe, half sadly. "I have been haunted by a good many in my time."

"Ay, those were women's," said Norman; "but I don't mean that, nor in that way. Do you know what it is to see a face which you recognise at once as being familiar to you, but to which you cannot put a name; which you have seen somewhere, but you cannot tell whether in real life or in a dream; which perpetually rises before you, always in the same unsatisfactory manner; the identity of which it is impossible to discover, while the more you try to link it with a personality the more vague do your thoughts grow, and the more dispirited are you as to your chances of success?"

"Yes," said Cleethorpe. "You have a fine poetical flow, Jack, but I know what you mean."

"Well, I have suffered from this sort of haunting for months past," said Norman. "We were in town in the spring, the first time we had been there for some years, and, amongst other places, we went to the house of a Mrs. Entwistle, a kind of connection of my wife's, who is a swell in her way, and had

never taken any notice of us before. She is an eccentric old woman, but very well off, they say, and goes into very good society. At her house I noticed a young man, whose face and manner seemed somehow familiar to me, though I felt that both had altered since the last time I saw him. He was talking to the guests, giving orders to the servants, and altogether making himself so much at home that I had the curiosity to inquire who he was. I learned that he was a Mr. Hardinge, a young man whom the old lady for a year or two past had adopted as her son, but whether he was related to her by blood, or whether her adoption of him was only one of her many eccentricities, I could not gather. Having gleaned thus much from an old fellow who used to dine at the next table to me at the 'Rag,' and who seemed to know everything about everybody in town, I went from the staircase, where I had carried on the pumping process, back into the rooms, and found my young friend in full swing as before. This time he caught me looking at him, started, turned rapidly on his heel, and for the rest of the evening carefully avoided coming near me. I met him several times afterwards in the park, at the theatre, in society, but invariably with the same result. He shunned me, sir, regularly shunned me; made a point of turning away whenever I approached him. During the whole of that time, and very frequently since, I have endeavoured to recall to my mind where I had seen that young man before, and who he was. As you spoke it suddenly

flashed upon me, and I have not the smallest doubt about it. The place where I last saw him was the inn at Cheeseborough, and his real name is George Heriot."

"Singular," said Captain Cleethorpe, when his companion had finished speaking, "very singular indeed. You are not generally very clear in these matters, Jack, but your reasoning convinces me that in the present instance you must be right. Do you imagine the boy recognised you?"

"Now I think it over I have not a doubt of it, though I cannot understand how I failed to recognise him. He has just that same cheeky kind of way that he had when he told me that it would be good for my health if he were my player at pool, and that he would give me plenty of exercise in walking after my ball."

"Do you imagine that his father knows of his position?"

"I have no means of judging, but I should say decidedly not."

"Did you ever try to get anything out of the old lady, Mrs. Entwistle?"

"What do you mean—money?"

"No, no," said Cleethorpe, laughing; "any information about the lad?"

"No, I didn't myself, but now I recollect perfectly that Lou—that's my wife—told me that on one occasion when she was having luncheon with the old lady alone, she happened to mention Sir Geoffry Heriot's

name, that Mrs. Entwistle turned as white as a sheet, and asked her in a very agitated manner, if she knew the General. When she found Lou did not she became all right again; but my Lou, who is a remarkably sharp woman, at least so I think, thought it was funny altogether, and told me of it when she came home."

"Mrs. Norman is a woman of great acuteness, I am sure," said Cleethorpe, "and it is a curious business altogether. However, since the old General is left solitary, and likely to remain so, the greater reason that he should be provided with a comely housekeeper who will do her duty by him without ultimate designs on his person or his purse. Mrs. Pickering is exactly the lady for the situation, and no possible objection can be made by anybody to her undertaking it unless by——"

"The Reverend Mr. Drage, sir," said Cooke, appearing at his master's elbow.

CHAPTER II.

A Revelation.

IN an old-fashioned terrace of high houses, leading off one of the principal thoroughfares of Springside, and approached oddly enough, first by a flight of crooked steps, and then by a narrow winding path, dwelt Mrs. Pickering, of whom Captain Cleethorpe had so much to say, and who has been erst known to the readers of this story as Madge Pierrepont.

In the three years which have elapsed since we last caught sight of her, she has materially improved in appearance. The rest and ease, the freedom from professional annoyances and private worry, the soft, bright, health-giving atmosphere, have had their invariably good effect, and her cheek is plumper, her eyes brighter, her figure more erect, and her footstep more light, than they have been since the days of her childhood. When she rose convalescent from the illness which attacked her on her first arrival at Springside, Madge felt that a vast amount of not merely bodily, but mental disorder, which had long been hanging around her, had passed away. Gone was that fever of expectation, gone that "restless unsatisfied longing." No longer had she to dread the arrival of bad news, no longer to await, with trembling anxiety, the caprices of a man, who, while his affection for her

had departed, still possessed the right of disposing of her time and talent to suit his own purpose.

So far at least Philip Vane had kept his word. Whether by design or accident, most probably the latter (for neither in the telegraph clerk, nor in the governess, leading a peaceful hum-drum life with her little charge, would he ever have dreamt of looking for the popular actress), he had never crossed her path. In the beneficent course of time, the early days of her married life seemed to have almost faded out from her memory, while of the later days she thought no more than as reminiscences of an ugly dream, which, from time to time, would obtrude itself upon her, only to render her, if possible, more grateful for the peaceful quiet which she then enjoyed.

Nor was Madge's tranquil life clouded by a doubt as to the wisdom of her conduct in regard to Gerald Hardinge. Whatever might have been the feelings which had animated her during that brief season, when stung by Philip's scorn, and touched by Gerald's devotion, she had hesitated what course to pursue, they were quite gone ere the doctor pronounced her to be convalescent, and she knew herself to be once more in her right mind. Closely shutting out from mental retrospection any thought of occurrences in which Philip Vane had borne a part, she yet longed occasionally to linger over the memory of her final interview with Gerald, and even over the details of that night of agony, when she had renounced all hope of ever being anything to him, perhaps of ever seeing

him again. For by that renunciation she had done her duty, and was she not now reaping her reward? No trace of that passion, which, as she acknowledged to herself, she had entertained for him during those agonising hours of doubt, now remained! She could think of him—she did think of him often—with womanly tenderness and regard, so pure that the whole world might have known of it! She should like to see him, she should like to see his wife—for he must have a wife by this time, Madge thought—she should like him to think well of her, as an old friend; to think well of her, and as a friend, but nothing more.

It is the morning after the arrival of Captain Norman at his old friend's quarters, and Madge is seated at her little table in the window looking down upon the flagged terrace-walk, with the green railings in front. Before her is her little, old-fashioned, brass-bound writing-desk, with the blotting-book lying open upon it, and on that again a little almanack, which she has been consulting. She has somewhat more colour in her cheeks than in the days when we first knew her; but there is the same bright, frank, earnest look in the eyes, and the long brown hair is as luxuriant as ever.

"Just three years ago," she said to herself, referring again to the almanack, "just three years since I fled from Wexeter, and was directed, providentially as it seems now, to this place. By that act I seem to have closed and clasped as it were the first book of

my life, shutting in with it certain figures, which so far as I am concerned will, in all human probability, never appear again. There, entombed as I may say, for he is in every sense dead to me, is my husband, Philip Vane! His ghost never haunts my memory, and the only material thing I have to remind me of him is this."

As she spoke she took up a small leather note-case from the desk and looked at it contemptuously. "This note-case, which he must have left behind him on some occasion, and which contains a few cards, with his club address upon them, a strip of paper containing an odd jumble of alphabetical letters, and some betting memoranda. Why do I keep these any longer, I wonder? Better destroy them and—no!" she said, putting the papers back into the case, and shutting the case itself into the desk, "let them remain where they are; I have kept them so long that I may leave them there now, without any fear of their influencing me in favour of their late owner. To that book, too, belongs Gerald Hardinge, to whose dark blue eyes and chestnut hair this photograph—how well I recollect the day he gave it me!—does nothing like justice! And for the matter of that, to that belongs Margaret Pierrepont, and every troubled incident of her life! What a peaceful career has Mrs. Pickering's been, and how grateful ought she to be for it!"

She was interrupted by the entrance of the servant with a letter.

"From Rose," she said to herself, as soon as the

girl had gone. "It is only two days ago that I heard from her. What can have induced her, usually so chary of her correspondence, to write again so soon? There can be nothing wrong with her, I trust."

She opened the letter, and read as follows:

DEAREST MADGE,—You will be surprised to hear from me again so quickly, and will imagine, either that I have taken seriously to heart the scoldings which you have so frequently given me for being so bad a correspondent, or that something is the matter. I am glad to say that the latter is certainly not the case, and I am afraid I cannot take credit for the former; but I have a piece of news for you which I cannot resist sending to you at once. This morning, on my way to the office, whom should I meet but Mr. Gerald Hardinge, looking very well, and O, Madge, so wonderfully handsome! He was very well-dressed too, had beautiful boots and gloves, and looked what they call, quite a swell. Don't you recollect, in the old days at Wexeter, you used to say that you thought he belonged to some good family? I am sure you would have thought so if you had seen him to-day; perhaps he has been taken up and properly recognised by them?

He hardly knew me at first, and would have passed by me without speaking, but I gave such a start. It was very rude, I know, but I could not help it, Madge; and he noticed it and half stopped, and then I spoke to him by his name. He recollected me at

once, then declared I had almost grown out of knowledge. He said that I always looked so delicate at Wexeter, that he never thought I should have lived, but that there was no harm in telling me that now, as from my present appearance, there was no fear of my premature dissolution. He was very kind, and asked me all about myself, what I was doing, and where I lived—in a nice way, don't you know, Madge, without the smallest sign of *arrière pensée* about it? And he laughed when I told him about the telegraph office, and said he remembered what active fingers I used to have in the old days, when he gave me those drawing lessons. He laughed much more when I asked him whether he was at any London theatre; he could not understand at first what I meant. When I told him that I meant as a scene-painter, he positively shouted with delight, although it was in the open street, and there were people passing all round. So then he said "no," and laughed again as he added that he had come into his property; and when I said that I hoped that had not made him give up painting altogether, he said, "he did a little now and then, but only for amusement." I have heard since, from one of our young ladies, who is very fond of art, that there were two pictures in the Exhibition this last season by Mr. Hardinge, which were very highly thought of.

Wasn't it odd, Madge, that he never once asked after you, never even mentioned your name, until I told him that Mrs. Bland was taking care of me, and

then he asked where you were. I did not tell him, Madge, as you had made me promise never to tell any one, but said, in a general sort of way, that you were not living in London, said you had left the theatrical profession, and he then asked me if you were married. I did not know what to say, Madge, for that was a contingency we had never provided for, and Mr. Hardinge looked so hard at me while he spoke, that I grew confused, and stuttered and stammered before I eventually said "yes." I hope I did right, Madge, but I had no time for reflection; and as I am only partially in your confidence, not knowing your reasons for representing yourself as a widow, I could only act to the best of my ability. I thought Mr. Hardinge turned rather white when I told him, and then he slightly shrugged his shoulders, and changed the subject.

He was very kind, Madge, very kind indeed, and all in such a nice way! He asked me if I were still fond of drawing, and when I told him that I had given it up, almost from want of time, and that my principal amusement was reading, he said that he had plenty of books, which he should be pleased to lend to me. "I will send my servant with them," he said; "I will not come myself, so that neither Mrs. Bland nor Mrs. Grundy shall be scandalised, or, better still," he added, "there is a dear old lady, who is a great friend of mine—she is rather out of health just now, but as soon as she is a little better she shall call upon you and bring them to you. I should like her to

know you, Rose, and I am sure she would take a fancy to you." It was so odd to hear him call me Rose, just as he did in the old times when I was a child.

Write to me, Madge dear, and tell me what you think of all this. I have just read over what I have written, and find it does not at all give you the notion which I wished to convey of Mr. Hardinge's niceness and kindness, of the total freedom of his manner from anything like either patronage or familiarity. Without feeling that, you may think I did wrong in telling where I lived, but I am sure that if—that you—there I cannot explain what I mean, but you will understand me.

Your loving
ROSE.

P.S. Your letter just arrived about the offer of the old Indian General. I hope you intend to say "yes."

"Poor Rose," murmured Madge, as she laid down the letter; "yes, you did perfectly right, dear; you could not have done better if I had taken you wholly into my confidence, as you seem to think I ought to have done. What she told him," continued Madge, musing, "will be simply a corroboration of what I had stated in my letter to him, written on that eventful night. Turned white did he? Poor Gerald, I cannot understand that. He must surely have expected it. I have thought of him as married often enough; but I was his first love, I fancy, and that I suppose makes

all the difference. Strange that I should hear this news of him just now, when I had been so recently thinking of him, and when another change in my life seems imminent."

Glancing through the letter again, she continued: "O, yes, I perfectly understand what Rose thinks she has failed to express. Who could understand better than I the gentleness of his manner? Who could so well appreciate the real nobility of his character? I have often thought, were I in trouble or distress, there is no one to whom I would so readily appeal; now, I mean, when the lapse of time would render impossible any misinterpretation of the nature of the application. Not married! He cannot be married, or Rose would have stated so plainly in so many words. But who can this old lady be, who is going to call upon Rose, and take an interest in her?

"Well-dressed, and happy-looking, and only practising his art for his amusement! My old idea, then, the idea upon which Philip Vane used to harp so much, was the right one; Gerald's appearance in our theatrical circle at Wexeter was purely accidental. He was well-born and well-bred, had had some quarrel with his friends, and actuated by boyish, high-spirited impulse, had run away from them, and was sowing his wild oats in a different fashion from that usually followed by young fellows of his class. Now he has returned home again, has been received by his people, and resumed his proper position. Would they," said Madge, with a sad smile, "would they so gladly have

welcomed the return of the prodigal, if he had brought back with him as his wife a stage-player, somewhat older than himself, whose family and whose antecedents were alike unknown? I think not. If I had ever for an instant been doubtful of the wisdom of the decision which I then made, the news thus brought would have settled it! Just and merciful to us both was that decision; merciful more especially to him, though bitterly hard to bear at the time, and Gerald, as it would seem from Rose's innocent account of his behaviour at the news, even now scarcely acquiesces in it. Come in!"

These last words were spoken in answer to a knock at the door.

Enter Captain Cleethorpe, carefully dressed, as befits a man particular about his appearance, who is going to call upon a pretty woman, and with his best manner, which is frank without being careless, and familiar without being impertinent.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Pickering. Don't let me disturb you," he adds, waving his cane jauntily, and pointing to the letter, which Madge still holds in her hand.

"You don't disturb me in the least, Captain Cleethorpe," replied Madge; "I have already read this letter twice through."

"The writer ought to be proud to command so much of Mrs. Pickering's time and attention," said Captain Cleethorpe, with old-fashioned gallantry.

"The writer is an acquaintance of yours, my sister."

"What, pretty Miss Rose; and how is she getting on among the dials and disks, and all the wonderful telegraphic apparatus in London?"

"She is very well, and writes in excellent spirits."

"That's right; she was far too clever to waste her life in a dull provincial town."

"That's scarcely complimentary to present company, is it, Captain Cleethorpe?" said Madge, with a smile.

"My dear Mrs. Pickering, your duties lay in a different sphere, one which, in my opinion, is more important and more responsible than your sister's. See how wonderfully it has all turned out! There is no other woman in the world whom Mr. Drage would have intrusted with the charge of his little child; there is no other woman, of my acquaintance, whom I would conscientiously recommend to Sir Geoffry Heriot to fill the position about which I spoke to you the other day."

"You are very kind, Captain Cleethorpe," said Madge.

"No, I am only very frank," said the Captain; "and, by the way, I want your definite reply to my proposal. I ought to write to-night, or to-morrow the latest."

"I am afraid I must ask you to give me till to-morrow; my own feeling is strongly to say yes, but I

have not yet seen Mr. Drage since his return, and I am so much indebted to him that I should not think of deciding upon such an important matter without his advice and approval."

"Not yet seen Mr. Drage?" said Cleethorpe; "that's strange, he was at the Bungalow last night, when we talked the matter fully out. To be sure," he said, after a minute's consideration, "I recollect I was the only person who spoke, and Captain Norman, a friend of mine, who is staying with me, joined in the conversation, so that I did not think the padre had any opportunity of definitely expressing his opinion."

"He sent me a line saying that he would call upon me this morning, so that I shall be sure to see him."

"And within the next five minutes," said Cleethorpe, who was standing by the window, "for there he is, crossing the road, and just about to mount the steps; there is no mistaking his figure anywhere. I will not intrude upon you any longer, Mrs. Pickering, but will call upon you to-morrow morning, about this time, for your final decision; now adieu."

And Captain Cleethorpe took Mrs. Pickering's hand, bent over it, and disappeared.

From the window Madge saw the meeting between her late visitor and Mr. Drage. The latter had his back towards her, but Madge noticed him make an affirmative motion with his head as the Captain pointed towards her house. Then she moved away,

and shortly afterwards she heard the well-known, painfully slow footstep, and hard hacking cough, echo on the staircase outside.

Then came a knock at the door, followed immediately by Mr. Drage's entrance. A tall, thin man, Mr. Drage, with high shoulders and narrow chest. What little hair he had was light in colour, and brushed off his high forehead. His features were clear cut and regular, but his gray eyes were deep sunken in his head, his close-shaven cheeks were hollow and wan, and he endeavoured in vain to hide with his long lean hand the nervous twitching of his thin dry lips. He was dressed in severest clerical costume, all in black, and, in lieu of neckcloth or collar, wore a clear-starched muslin band round his throat. A fine head his, of the ascetic intellectual type, wanting but the tonsure and the cowl to complete its outward resemblance to one of those zealot monks, whom Domenichino loved to paint. And assuredly in no monk was ever to be found a greater combination of selflessness, humility, and zeal, than animated the sickly frame of Onesiphorus Drage!

A bright hectic spot rose on either cheek as Madge advanced to greet him. "I am so glad to see you back again, Mr. Drage," she said, giving him her hand; "you have been away a long time, but your health is much improved, I trust?"

"I am better, much better," said Mr. Drage, after a pause; "but those steps outside, and the steep bank, are a little trying to me. I have breath enough left,

however, dear Mrs. Pickering, to thank you for the care you have taken of little Bertha during my absence, and the wonderful improvement you have effected in her."

They were seated by this time, she in the chair she had been occupying by the table in the window, he facing her at a little distance.

"Bertha is an apt pupil, and a very good child," said Madge, with some little constraint, as though the subject just introduced would probably lead to discussion which she was desirous of avoiding. "You arrived the night before last, Mr. Drage?"

"Yes, I fully intended calling on you yesterday, but I was a little overcome with fatigue after my journey; and, besides, I found a letter from Captain Cleethorpe awaiting me, a letter which affected you, and demanded a certain amount of deliberation on my part."

Rocks ahead showing themselves again, and now scarcely any chance of steering away from them!

"From Captain Cleethorpe?" repeated Madge; "O, yes."

"In it Captain Cleethorpe informed me—addressing me, he was pleased to say, and rightly, as one who had a particular interest in your welfare—that he had just submitted to you a proposition, which he thought it would be greatly for your advantage to accept. You follow me?" asked Mr. Drage, looking

at her earnestly, and nervously passing his hand across his brow.

"O, yes," said Madge, "it is quite correct. I heard from Captain Cleethorpe some days since."

"Exactly," said Mr. Drage. "I did not quite understand the details of the proposed arrangement from Captain Cleethorpe's letter, and as it was an important matter to me"—the hectic spots flushed out on his cheek again, and he had to pause a moment before he continued—"as it was an important matter to me, I thought it better to see him and talk it out, before I came to you. Accordingly, I called upon him last night."

"Yes," said Madge, "so Captain Cleethorpe told me. He was here just now."

"Exactly. I met him outside. The proposition as I understand it, Mrs. Pickering, is, that you should go as housekeeper to some friend of Captain Cleethorpe's—a retired officer, who is about to settle in this neighbourhood?"

"That is so."

"And you have promised to let Captain Cleethorpe know your final decision by to-night or to-morrow morning?"

"I have."

There was a pause for a few minutes, and then Mr. Drage said, with hesitating voice and strange manner:

"It was very good of Captain Cleethorpe to ask my opinion on this question. It has given me a

little time to think, and—not that I know that the blow would have been less fatal if it had come upon me unawares. See,” he said, rising to his feet, but bending over her as he leaned across the table at which she sat—“see,” he said, speaking in a low tone, but very rapidly, “if you go from me, I die!”

Madge started, and looked up at him in affright. “You—you must not speak to me like that,” she said.

“And why not,” he continued, “when what I say to you is the truth? Ever since I have been away I have been pursued with this one same idea, the hope of making you my wife. I have striven against it, fought with it, but in vain. Each simple letter written by you, telling only of the child’s doings and progress, has shown me how completely you were fitted to guide her in her future life, to cheer and comfort what remains to me of mine. On every side I find, unsought, testimony to your goodness and your sweetness, in the affectionate regard with which all those with whom you are brought into contact openly speak of you. Mary, what I have to offer you is but little, indeed. My life, I know, is ebbing fast. O, that does not trouble me,” he said, as she looked up, and involuntarily made a motion with her hand. “I have looked forward to my release for so long, that I do not know if, even with you for my companion, I should be glad of a reprieve. But I do know that the touch of your dear hand would nerve me better to bear what must be borne; the sound of your dear voice would soothe me in the anguish which is to be endured; the knowledge that I had left

you as the legitimate protector of my child would comfort me when no other human comfort could avail. This is the only power of appeal I have; may I not make it to you now?"

"No, no; again I say no!"

"May I ask why?"

She paused a moment, and then said: "You know nothing of me, nor of my former life. Before I married I was—I was an actress."

He started back, and clutched the table tightly.

"An actress!" he repeated. "But you were good and virtuous, I am sure; you could not have been otherwise. Is there no other reason?"

"Yes," she said, very quietly, "there is. I will tell it you now, for after what you have said to me you deserve to know it, though when I lay on my death-bed, as you and I thought when you first knew me, I would never have suffered it to pass my lips. I am no widow, but a deserted wife. My husband is alive."

CHAPTER III.

The General Manager.

TEN o'clock in the morning, and the sun shining with all his might. He has been "at this game," as one of the conductors of the innumerable omnibuses slowly travelling across Westminster Bridge remarks, looking upwards and shaking his head in a deprecating manner, for the last three months. During that time scarcely a drop of rain has fallen, the days have been blazing and the nights stifling, and the drought tremendous. From the country come dire rumours of burnt-up crops and dying cattle, while, in the poorer neighbourhoods of town, the water, always dealt out, owing to the admirable municipal arrangements, with a niggard hand, is now so scarce that parochial doctors are beginning to shake their heads in alarm, and letters, advocating inquiry and sanitary reform, are cropping up in the various newspapers.

There is no mistake at all about the intensity of the heat. You can tell it from the smell of the river, now by the various passing steam-boats churned into a tide of feculent mud, now lazily ebbing, now as lazily flowing, but always filthy, loathsome, and pestiferous. You would have seen signs of its power had you been present, eight hours ago, amongst the senators, in the feeble tones and languid manner of the

jaded statesman, weary of his speeches and of himself, and in the dull, despairing apathy of the few members left to listen to him. You can trace its effects in the extra sodden and pallid faces of the clerks lining the knife-boards of the City-bound omnibuses, men whose ordinarily dull and dreary lives, spent in low-ceilinged, gas-lit offices, have this year been rendered more than ordinarily horrible by the intense heat within, and the knowledge of the perpetual sunshine without, and who are almost goaded to desperation at the thought that the fine weather might break up suddenly, before their annual fortnight's holiday was obtainable.

Heat, tremendous heat, everywhere! The narrow-chested, long-ribbed horses in the cabs and omnibuses carry even less flesh than usual, and under the heavy loads which they have to drag, suffer so much as even to excite the pity of their drivers, who, in their turn, have relinquished their normal clothing, and even in straw hats and shirt-sleeves are too much influenced by the weather to beat their cattle or swear at their comrades. Heedless of the minatory glances of the policemen on duty, heedless even of the crisp mandates by which these glances are occasionally followed, the itinerant vendors of fruit and cheap effervescent drinks stop their barrows by the side of the footway, and speedily are surrounded by clamorous customers. One of these, pushing his long tray before him, and with his head turned over his shoulder, not looking where he went, strolled quietly across the road, taking no notice of the approach of an aristocratic brougham

which was bearing down upon him. The fruit in the tray was West Indian pine-apple, cut into luscious, sticky slices, and over them hung a painted canvas banner, representing several West Indians, very black and very shiny, gathering and eating the fruit in great enjoyment. The whole thing was common and vulgar, and cheap and low, and as the horse in the brougham was an aristocratic horse, he shied at it; and as the coachman was a fat, well-paid varlet, aping the manners of his superiors, he swore at it, and there was a general row, ending as usual in mob and policeman.

The latter had already assumed an appearance of portentous judicial wisdom, a condition to which his wooden cast of countenance helped him not a little, and had produced his note-book, when a voice from within the brougham told him to go to the devil, and bade the coachman drive on. At this unexpected interference with his dignity, the policeman, highly incensed, pocketed his note-book, and leaving the horse's head, walked round to the brougham door with the intention of remonstrating; but after glancing through the window, he merely smiled a stolid smile, touched his helmet with his stiff forefinger, and motioning to the coachman, stood watching the carriage as it rolled easily away.

What the policeman saw when he looked in at the carriage window was the figure of a tall, handsome man, with bright black eyes and sound pearly teeth, which gleamed as he smiled in recognition of the of-

ficial's salute, an aquiline nose, and a close-cut black beard. His appearance generally was magnificent; his dark hair, the ends of which were just beginning to be touched with gray, was surmounted by a very glossy curly-brimmed hat. He wore a white waistcoat, with a massive gold chain across it, at one end of which swung various golden charms; an open shirt-front, with plain gold studs, and a flaming red necktie, a blue frock-coat, with a velvet collar, and light trousers. He had varnished boots on his feet, and lavender kid gloves on his hands, and was smoking a cigar, a trifle under half a foot in length. He was altogether gorgeous, and his name was Philip Vane.

Whence this transfiguration? In former days Philip Vane, even doing the best for himself, as he was always in the habit of doing, without caring who might suffer, was lean and hungry-looking. Strive as he might to disguise it, there had always been a certain look of eagerness and anxiety about his eyes; now he was stout, radiant, joyous. Gone, too, was every trace of the turf and its associations; gone were the sporting cut of the coat, the tight trousers, the spotted necktie, the horse-shoe pin. The air of nonchalant languor was replaced by a brisk, sharp manner, sometimes genial, sometimes determined, but always business-like. Things of the past were the attendance at Tattersall's, the consultation of sporting oracles, the league with jockeys, touts, and tipsters; scarcely more than a reminiscence now was the apartment for "club gentlemen;" and the Major—no longer Major—in discarding his military

prefix, had dropped with it nearly all the associations of his former life. How had this come about? Philip Vane had "gone into the City."

Just about that time many men went into the City, who had never previously crossed the boundary of Temple Bar. Scores of them, legions of them; princes of the blood, and peers of the realm; dignitaries of the church, and mighty men of valour, holding high positions in the army and navy; young men just beginning life, and old men from whom life had almost retired; struggling government clerks, and opulent tradesmen; artists with the pencil, and artists with the pen, seeking for a short cut to fortune, if not to fame; clergymen, who inveighed against the sin of greed from their pulpits on the Sunday, and haggled with shares during the week; and petty shop-keepers: all these went into the City, most of them in person, swarming down upon the stronghold of the brokers, and the jobbers, and the agents on 'Change; questioning, criticising, pleading, begging, buying, bargaining, chaffering; some keeping aloof themselves, and only lending their noble names as directors of boards of management, but all with one and the same idea, the allotment of shares in the companies which were springing up by dozens daily, the immediate sale of these shares at high premium, and hence the speedy fabrication of fortune.

Daily and nightly, for the nights were far too precious to be wasted, did those on whom the concoction of these various schemes devolved, grind, and

slave, and labour, in giving to their aerial fabrics a semblance of stability, and an appearance of reality. These gentry were a new brood, a species never before seen, even on the chequered surface of City life. Formerly, even in the wildest days of speculative madness, scarcely a scheme had been broached, with any reasonable hope of support, which had not something, however small, of a basis and a foundation. In those days, no matter what the nature of the transaction, men going in for City speculation took shares in a company, and held or sold them, and were rich or ruined, as the case might be. But in these latter days there sprang into existence men who made their money by simply working the lever by which the various companies were started, or "floated" them, to use the more correct term, and who, of necessity, had no other connection with the concern (save, indeed, when they knew its value, and chose to hold by it) than the certain number of shares paid to them as part of their hire money, which they disposed of at the first convenient opportunity. "Promoters" they were called, and the profession being a lucrative one, and requiring neither capital nor certificates of character, soon found many followers. Men who had been, as they themselves described it, "knocking about doing nothing;" men who had been doing worse than nothing, the morally halt, maimed, and blind; men who, having been long since given over by their friends, had been morally dead for years—all these suddenly reappeared, holding commissions in the great promot-

ing army. Some fell out of the ranks at once, and died by the wayside—the pace was too good for them; others as immediately struggled into brevet rank, and held their own, and more than their own—other people's. Of this last number was Philip Vane.

Sharp, shrewd, and unscrupulous, ready-witted and prompt to act, with a good address, a pleasing presence, and fascinating manners, Philip Vane was just the man for a "promoter," and in that capacity his services were in requisition by half a dozen different persons who knew his value, at the outbreak of the mania. Experience, however, soon taught him that in such matters genius diffused is wasted, and he speedily determined to concentrate his energies on such schemes only as were submitted to him by the one man alone in whose worldly sagacity he had implicit belief. That man was Mr. Delabole.

In long-headedness and foresight, in what is now called "financing," Mr. Delabole had few equals, and no superior. Philip Vane was brighter and smarter, better educated, and more calculated to inspire confidence among the young, who nowadays are by no means the most ready to confide, and possessing those very qualifications, the absence of which had always militated against Mr. Delabole's social success, a decent appearance and the manner of a man of the world.

Mr. Delabole had, however, that which Philip Vane had never possessed, the command of money, and a reputation, not merely for wealth, but for luck in

speculating, which served his purpose wonderfully at that particular crisis. Moreover, he was sufficiently acquainted with commercial matters, and sufficiently mixed up with the City world, to be able to float any affair which he might undertake, with the aid of a few chosen friends, and without having to invoke the assistance of any of the outside world, who would afterwards have a claim to participate in the plunder. There was Parkinson, of Thavies Inn, whose door-jambs bore the inscription, "Walters and Parkinson, solicitors," but who was the only member of the firm, and whose real business was bill-discounting for clerks of good position in government offices, for men at the bar, to whom success had come late in life, and who were yet financially hampered by the indiscretions or the necessities of their youth, and for other men, who were undeniably responsible. No one ever saw Parkinson's name in a legal case, but he made believe to be an attorney very hard indeed, and denied the discountership as much as possible. The desk, in the drawers and pigeon-holes of which were locked away the acceptances and promissory notes, had a few dummy rolls of paper, duly docketed and red-taped, scattered over its top, and when an intending borrower called on Mr. Parkinson, he would find that worthy inspecting one of his dummies through his double eye-glass, and apparently quite astonished at the proposition made to him. "He had thought," he would remark in all simplicity, "that his visitor had looked in to consult him on some point of law, was

about to intrust him with some little conveyancing matter, such as that," lightly touching the dummy with his glasses, "which he just had in hand. Money? He was not a money-lender. That must be clearly understood." And when the visitor, frightened at his virtuous aspect, was about to withdraw, Mr. Parkinson had to soften a little, and admit that he had been occasionally in the habit of obliging his friends—his friends only, mind—and that he had a few hundreds lying at his bank, and that, in point of fact, his friend could be obliged at the rate of about forty per cent. A tall, thin, fair-haired man Parkinson, with blonde whiskers and light blue eyes, of a benevolent expression, like a weak-minded fox; held in thralldom by a stout, over-dressed wife; churchwarden of his parish, and firmly believed by his vicar to be one of the most conscientious and kindest-hearted of men.

Of this clique, too, was Mr. Naseby, a dried-up, withered old gentleman, always wearing a tall hat, a high, cross-barred, clear-starched muslin cravat, with sharp-pointed collars emerging therefrom, a tightly-buttoned frock-coat, shepherd's-plaid trousers, and patent boots; a little man, with a worn-out air, who looked like an old peer of the realm, but was a tradesman in Bond-street. There was nothing of the comic author's or artist's notion of the tradesman about Mr. Naseby; his conversation never showed the slightest solecism, his manner never betrayed the faintest trace of bad breeding; he lived in charming chambers, and had a perfect country house, belonged to a trades-

men's club, where the cooking was better and the play higher than at any other similar establishment in London, and was a softer Sybarite and a keener man of business than any of the customers whose aristocratic names were entered on his ledger. Mr. Bolckoff, a Polish Jew, and an old companion of Mr. Delabole's, who had been bankrupt twice and transported once, and had subsequently made an enormous fortune as a contractor during the American war; Mr. Poss, a tobacco manufacturer in Whitechapel; and little Mr. van Moysey, the diamond merchant of Amsterdam, assisted in forming the set.

Moneyed men these, ready with their thousands when necessary, with implicit confidence in Delabole's generalship, and begetting a vast amount of confidence in any scheme with which their names were associated, amongst a certain class of wealthy speculative people. For the general public, however, a certain aristocratic flavouring was necessary, and Mr. Delabole took care that it should be forthcoming.

So at his beck and call, to be used as chairman or vice-chairman, or to take up humbler positions among the directors, according to the amount of strength and apparent stability with which it was necessary to endow the scheme about to be launched, were members of both Houses of the legislature, baronets, and brothers of peers with handles to their names, retired generals and admirals who had seen service, and made money in every quarter of the globe, and a host of minor dignitaries, each one of

whom had some specialty rendering him worthy of his hire. For hire they all received, whether it were in the shape of salaries and emoluments, of gratuitous shares allotted early, and readily converted into gold, of attendance fees and per diem allowances, or of hard cash unblushingly paid down, and as unblushingly received. In that year the Earl of Ballabrophy received more from Mr. Delabole and similar agencies, for the use of his right honourable name, than had been paid to him by his long-suffering land-steward for the previous decade; Sir Cannock Chase, a Staffordshire baronet, who had mortgaged his ancestral hall to the proprietors of the collieries subsequently found on his estate, and who, as a great favour, was allowed by his creditors to have the right of shooting over his own manor, made in salaries, premiums, &c., a sufficient sum to help him to Baden, where he had a wonderful run of luck; while the Honourable Pounce Dossetor, for whom Lord Glenthresher had obtained a clerkship in the Audit Office during the short spurt while his party were in power, invested the funds which he obtained for the loan of his "honourable-ship" in a cab and tiger, smart clothes and an opera-stall, and by these means won the hand and fortune of Miss Swank, the West India heiress.

By the aid of this *mélange* of Jews and Gentiles, patricians and proletarians, plutocrats and penniless peers, with always the clear intellect of Mr. Delabole as its guide, and the shrewdness and tact and worldly knowledge of Philip Vane, acting as the clamping iron

which held it together, some of the most extraordinary, even of the schemes which at that time were submitted to the public, made their successful appearance. City men will remember the Trust and Loan Company of Futtighur, empowered to act under a special concession from the Nawab Nizam of the district; the Hammersmith Havanna and Turnham-green Trabucos Association, for the cultivation of the choicest growths of tobacco in the immediate vicinity of London; the Primrose-hill People's Palace and Park, or Miniature Mont Blanc Company, which proposed to cover the Camden Town mountain with perpetual snow by aid of a freezing apparatus, to fit it up with miniature châteaux, Grands Mulets, rifts and crevasses, and for the payment of a shilling to give a visitor an opportunity of going through the whole of the Swiss excitement within the space of half an hour, with the option of being killed at the end.

These were some of the lighter achievements of the Delabole set, but there were others of far greater weight and importance; banking companies and insurance offices, projects in which philanthropy and the realisation of large percentages were to run hand in hand by the formation of docks and harbours of refuge in outlying portions of the coast; propositions for the development of new mines, or for the working of others, which, while still undeniably fertile, had been abandoned for the want of the necessary capital; a service of submarine tramways, and of midair balloons; improvements in gas, and the substitution of

a new illuminating power. All these were taken in hand and bore fruit in their season. At the time, however, that we again take up our acquaintance with Mr. Philip Vane, though several of these schemes were on hand, there was one which engrossed the greater part of his attention, and to which all others were subordinate, the Terra del Fuegos Silver Mining Company.

To the Terra del Fuegos undertaking Mr. Delabole had brought his best names, and his most wealthy colleagues. It was not a new affair just "prospected," and thrust upon the market, with the view of getting rid of the shares; some years previously it had been an undertaking in high repute amongst the mining brokers and such of their clients as did not mind a somewhat hazardous speculation, provided they obtained a high premium. The opinion of the mining engineers was that, as a speculation, the Terra del Fuegos were decidedly hazardous; the soil in which they were situated being, on the whole, of a loose and shifty nature, bad to work, and liable to fall in, and there being undoubted evidence of the presence of water springs in the immediate neighbourhood. What had been prophesied at last occurred; there was a sad accident, the earth fell in upon the men, the works were suspended, and finally stopped. An attempt was made to re-open them, but the experimentalists were people without either knowledge or capital, and it failed. Since then, and until within the previous twelve months, the mines had been closed. Then the

scheme was submitted to Mr. Delabole, who went through it cautiously, and finally gave his opinion as to its practicability. One of the cleverest mining engineers in England was sent out, reported favourably, and superintended the sinking of another shaft, where two or three very productive lodes were discovered. The success thus begun continued; lodes after lodes, running parallel and easily to be got at, were discovered, and the shares were at a high premium. When appealed to about them, Mr. Delabole always recommended them as the best and safest of all the investments with which he had to do; but the mining engineer, after his return from his second visit, twelve months after the re-opening of the mine, quietly went into the market and sold his shares.

To the offices of the Terra del Fuegos, situate in the City, Philip Vane is now hastening, after his elaborate little breakfast in his West End home. He has gotten over the annoyance caused by the row with the itinerant fruiterer, and is leaning back in his brougham, placidly smoking his cigar. The chiming of the quarter past ten by Big Ben suggests to Philip Vane the consultation of his watch; finding it correct, he is sliding it back into his pocket, when, conspicuous by its new gold amongst the many dainty trifles pendent from his chain, he notices a locket which has been attached there recently. Philip Vane smiles in a pleasantly conscious manner as this trophy meets his eye, and shakes his head, and would blush if he had recollected how. Finally he opens the locket, which has

two crossed horse-shoes, one in diamonds, the other in turquoise, on one side of it, and an illegible monogram on the other, and smiles again as he looks at its contents. It is the portrait of a woman past the first bloom of her youth, but eminently handsome, with large black eyes and aquiline profile, full sensuous lips, and masses of black hair, heaped up into an eccentric coil on her head.

Philip Vane contemplated this portrait for some little time, and when he snapped the locket to, he took from his breast-pocket a Russia leather note-case, containing a few letters, and selecting one from amongst them, replaced the others, and opened this carefully. It had been opened before, apparently with a certain amount of care; the paper round the seal had been cut away, and the seal itself was intact. It bore a crest on a widow's lozenge, with the motto, *Quo Fata ducunt*. Philip Vane looked at this seal before he took out the contents of the envelope, held it up, so that the light might fall upon it, and examined it critically. "I never noticed her seal before," he said to himself. "*Quo Fata ducunt*—whither the Fates lead. I suppose that's her motto; at all events, it's by no means a bad one, and quite suitable to me. I may as well adopt it with the rest of her belongings."

Then he took out the letter, and read it carefully through. It was a long letter, covering several sheets of thick paper, and written in a woman's hand.

Its perusal seemed quite satisfactory to Philip Vane.

"I don't think I could do better," he muttered to himself; "I have been tempted often before, but have deferred and deferred, waiting for the ten-strike to come off, the one big thing to turn up! I don't think I need wait any longer! I may go on dipping and dipping, and never have the chance of finding such another prize in the lucky-bag. Sixty thousand pounds, and a very handsome woman, who adores me! I don't think I could improve upon that—Quo Fata ducunt, eh? and they have led me into rather a neat thing just now, I fancy."

He was roused from his train of thought by his brougham stopping in front of the Terra del Fuegos offices. The porter bustled out to open the carriage door, and said to Philip Vane, in a tone which a combination of asthma and respect rendered eminently husky:

"Mr. Delabole, sir, has been asking for the general manager."

CHAPTER IV.

The Business of the Board.

THE offices of the Terra del Fuegos Mining Company were situated at the corner of a court, wherein were located the business premises of many of those wealthy old City firms, described with such unction by the newspaper reporter as "our merchant princes." It was probably in deference to the taste of the younger scions of these eminent firms, that the court had always a fringe, or selvage, of a sporting character; greasy varlets hung about its portals, rubbing their shoulders against the walls, and holding in their grubby hands strings or chains, at the other extremities of which were various kinds of dogs, from the surly English bull, with his flattened nose and his curling under-hung lip, to the polite French poodle, all pink, and shorn, and curled, and apparently quite ready for the dance. The taste of the elder denizens of the court was probably consulted by the vendors of the loquacious gray parrots and closely conferring love-birds, who also hung about the neighbourhood; while the gorgeous pictures of sunsets and moonlights, and Swiss mountain and British sea, in all of which the quantity and quality of the colour were so very much out of proportion to the size of the canvas, were publicly displayed for the entrapment of old ladies

and gentlemen who had been drawing their dividends at the Bank, or country cousins brought to stare at the Royal Exchange.

It was part of Mr. Delabole's plan that the offices of the Terra del Fuegos Company should be in this particular position, situated in the very midst of the wealth and power of the City; but it was equally part of his plan that in themselves they should be plain and simple, and by no means loud, glaring, or new. The name of the company was inscribed on the wire blind in the lower room, in small tasteful letters; the brass plates on the door-jambs were simple and unpretending; the hall-porter was dressed in sober brown, a little relieved by red piping; and the messengers looked like well-to-do waiters.

"We don't want any fuss or flurry," said Mr. Delabole, speaking on this point; "we don't beat drums or blow trumpets, like mountebanks vending their nostrums in the market-place; we don't combine life insurance with loans, like the Friendly Grasp opposite, or tout for banking business like the Deferred Depositors, a little lower down. We are a mining company, and not all the brass plates or polished furniture in the world would increase by one the yield of oitavas, or the value of the lode. No, the quieter we keep in that way the better." Thus Mr. Delabole to his brother directors, adding, "The real publicity which we want is to be gained by advertising, by squaring newspaper proprietors and City correspondents, and fellows who go about and talk and earwig people. Put

aside a certain sum for them, and go it!" And they went it accordingly.

After dismissing his brougham, Philip Vane, preceded by the porter, who opened the doors for him, passed through the outer public offices, where a dozen clerks, some old, some young, but all of most respectable appearance, were bending over their desks, and entered an inner room, the glass half of the door of which bore the word "Private." A large comfortable room, lit by a skylight, the big square writing-table covered with documents, tape-tied, docketed, and neatly arranged; with several easy-chairs about, and a high standing desk in one corner. One of the walls was covered by a frame of maps, and over the mantelpiece hung a large and admirably executed photograph of the central shaft of the Terra del Fuegos mine, with smaller ones representing other portions of the works, natives in their mining-dresses, the English engineers standing in a row, looking preternaturally grim and solemn, and very bulgy about the boots and hands, &c. In the corner of the room stood a large square glass case, containing various specimens of the ore, each duly labelled, and standing opposite to this glass case, and apparently deeply interested in the examination of its contents, Philip Vane found Mr. Delabole.

That gentleman turned at the sound of the opening door and nodded to his friend.

"You here already?" said Philip Vane; "there must be something particularly attractive in the worm

line hereabouts, to bring such a bird from his nest so early."

"No," said Mr. Delabole, "my early birdiness is rather due to the fact that I was feverish and could not rest."

"Too much claret last night?" asked Vane.

"No," said Mr. Delabole, "I think not, though I took a good deal of it, knowing the tap, as I have done for many years. I rather imagine that this confounded hot weather is knocking me up; I must run away somewhere and get change of air."

"Not yet," said Philip Vane sharply, looking steadily at him. "You must not go get."

"Must not?" said Mr. Delabole, raising his eyebrows.

"Must not," repeated Vane. "There are, as you know, two or three affairs connected with this place now in the balance, and until they are settled you must not go."

"What a man of business he has become!" murmured Mr. Delabole, looking at his companion admiringly through his half-shut eyes. "What energy, what industry, what determination! And all for his friends too. No thought of himself in any one of his proceedings." Then louder: "You are perfectly right, my good fellow, I should not dream of leaving London until these matters were settled."

"Have you taken any farther steps as regards Irving?"

"My dear fellow, I am always taking steps as

regards everybody! That is the one, and only one defect, my dear Philip, in you. Utterly unaccustomed to business during the early days of your life, you have now taken to it with an energy and relish marvellous to behold; but your ideas on one point are a little antiquated. You don't understand progress being made except in the regular routine; you transact your business with ledgers and daybooks, and leaden inkstands, and long quill-pens, and very respectable, but confoundedly dull people for your clerks. Now I do my business in evening dress, at the Opera, in society, over a filet, a glass of claret, a woman's fan! And yet I will back myself to make more way and get more influence after my fashion than you after yours."

"Very likely," said Philip Vane grimly. "I am sorry my way of doing business does not please you; but it can be altered of course. We need not keep any accounts at all; or such as we are compelled to have can be kept by comic clerks, chirping music-hall ditties over little account-books, gilt-edged and bound in Russia leather. Would that suit you?"

"No," said Mr. Delabole quietly, "it would not, nor does it ever suit me to be sneered at by—any one! Let us drop the subject."

Philip Vane saw that his companion was annoyed. There was scarcely another man in the world whom, prompted by his natural spirit of insolence, he would have hesitated to affront, but he could not afford to

quarrel with Mr. Delabole, and he knew it, so he changed his tone and manner in an instant.

"I fancy that the hot weather has had something to do with all our tempers," he said, with a half-laugh. "I know that I am unstrung and irritable to a degree, so I went for a long ride round the suburbs last night, to try if I could not get some freshness into me."

"You were alone?" asked Mr. Delabole, looking at him steadily.

"Quite alone."

"I am glad of it," said Mr. Delabole. "It would not do to be playing any pranks just now. I expected to find you on duty in Harley-street."

"No, I was asked, but on the whole I thought it better not to go. It is a little too soon to *afficher* the affair so publicly. Don't you agree with me?"

"Are you perfectly certain of your position?"

"Perfectly."

"You proposed yesterday as you intended?"

"I did."

"And she accepted you?"

"She did."

"Any tangible proofs?"

"This," said Philip Vane, uncoupling the locket from his chain, and placing it in his friend's hand, "this, which she gave me yesterday."

"That's not much," said Mr. Delabole, unconsciously, and from mere force of habit, weighing the trinket in his hand. "Nothing else?"

"This," said Philip Vane, taking his note-case from

his breast-pocket, and holding up the letter which he had been reading in his brougham; "this, which she wrote me last night."

"Ah!" said Mr. Delabole, drawing his breath, "that looks better. Does she commit herself?"

"Unquestionably."

"That will do," said Mr. Delabole. "I congratulate you. It is your modesty, I suppose, that prevented you dining there last night," he added, with a grin.

"What some people would call modesty, I suppose, but what I call tact," said Philip Vane. "I thought it better not. Had you a pleasant party?"

"Very pleasant," said Mr. Delabole; "Mrs. Bendixen herself looked splendidly handsome, and was in capital form, no doubt the result of her morning's interview with you. Then there were Poss and his wife, both very nervous, looking round to see how other people behaved and ate, and evidently disappointed at there being so little fried fish; a good-looking woman, whose name I could not catch, a grass widow, with a husband in India, or one of those convenient places; old Lord McTaggart, who came screwing up to me after dinner, and asked me to put him on to something good, he didn't care what; Asprey, and a deuced good-looking young fellow, whose name I have been trying to recollect, but can't. Queer name, too, high-sounding, romantic, like one of those odd combinations of aristocratic family names, used by the theatrical people who advertise in the *Haresfoot* for engagements."

"I never see the *Haresfoot*," said Philip Vane.

"Don't you?" said Mr. Delabole. "It is a deuced amusing paper; but you never did take any interest in theatrical matters," he added, looking at his companion closely. "However, Asprey got talking to me about this young fellow after dinner. It appears that he is the adopted son of some old lady with an immense lot of money, all of which, when the old lady dies, it is supposed, he will inherit. The old lady is very ill just now, and Asprey is attending her."

"Indeed," said Philip Vane. "If Asprey is attending her that looks well for the youth's chances of speedy inheritance, particularly if the Doctor is interested in the matter."

"The Doctor is a very wide-awake customer, as you know perfectly well, my dear Philip; and, as you know equally well, believes in us, and is in heavily with us. He thinks it very advisable that we should get hold of this young—Gerald Hardinge; that's the fellow's name,"

"Gerald Hardinge!" repeated Vane.

"Yes," said Delabole quickly. "Do you know him?"

"The name somehow seems familiar to me," said Vane, pondering. Then, after an instant's pause, "No, it cannot be the same."

"Why not?" asked Mr. Delabole. "Who was your friend?"

"He was no friend of mine," said Vane; "I never saw him. I think I recollect the name as scene-painter,

or something of that sort, in the same theatrical company with that Miss Pierrepont, the girl, you may remember, I spoke to you about, who I thought would suit your friend Wuff, but who would not go."

"I recollect," said Mr. Delabole, "there was a good deal of promise about that girl. Did you ever hear what became of her?"

"Not I," said Philip; "I had no interest in her, and only thought to do Wuff a turn. She's married, I suppose, or dead."

"Ah," said Delabole, "pretty much the same thing in her profession. I am not at all sure that this is not your man; there was some talk about his painting, I recollect, and Asprey said his was rather a romantic story. He promised to come here this morning and tell me all about it."

"You are rather weak in your pronouns, my dear Delabole," said Philip Vane. "Who is 'he'—the Doctor or the dupe?"

"You are rather strong in your language, my dear Vane," retorted Delabole. "Dupe is an awkward word to use, even amongst friends; it is the Doctor, Doctor Asprey, whom I expect here this morning."

"I am glad he is coming," said Philip Vane, with apparent heartiness, anxious to conciliate his companion; "a capital fellow Asprey, and one who has been of much service to us. He is such an excellent—There, I was going to use another word that might possibly offend your susceptibilities. I was going to say he is such an excellent decoy."

"Decoy is a good word," said Mr. Delabole, "and peculiarly applicable to Asprey. Yes, he has been very useful to us, and has probably been the means of bringing better people and more money into our various concerns than any of the outsiders. I never met another man with that peculiar power of propagating his ideas without unduly forcing them, or in the least committing himself."

"Do you think that it would be tolerably easy to get hold of this young fellow?"

"My dear Philip, the mere fact that the fellow is young, conveys to me the notion that it is easy to get hold of him either for good or evil, but certainly for evil. The mere fact that he has been poor, and he must have been poor when this old woman adopted him, conveys to me the certainty that he will be covetous and grasping, when he finds himself rich without any merit or labour of his own. He will want, without trouble, to double the fortune which will be left him, and—we will show him the way."

Then came a tap at the door, followed by the entrance of a messenger, who announced "Doctor Asprey."

"Show him in," said Philip Vane.

"By all means," added Mr. Delabole; "the very man we were wishing to see."

Hundreds of people had wished to see Doctor Asprey; people of very different kinds, and had wished to see him for very different reasons. Men stricken with what might be mortal illness, lying in

their beds raised upon their elbows, and listening with eager ears for the roll of his chariot wheels, or the soft sound of his footstep on the stairs. For not merely did the doctor's professional talent rank very highly, but relying on the strength of his reputation, he would give vent to the boldness and fertility of invention inherent in him, and have recourse to experiments from which most professional men would have shrunk, but which, with him, nearly always proved successful. In the smoking and card-rooms of clubs, too, few more welcome guests presented themselves; for the Doctor had a fund of anecdote of all kinds, and when he occasionally chose to spare the time, proved that he could hold his own with most men at a rubber. Women, too, delighted to see him, for he had a soft voice and pretty manners, and humoured and played with their little weaknesses without degrading himself or them; and he was adored by children, whose diseases he had made a special study, and whom he would comfort and cure as much by his kindness as by his prescriptions.

Universally respected and beloved then? Not quite. Doctor Tileoff, very old, very eccentric, by some supposed to be mad, but still practising as a consulting physician, had many years before refused to meet Doctor Asprey in consultation, declaring, when pressed for his reasons, 'that however much he respected the courage of a man who murdered his wife, he did not feel inclined to shake hands with him. Sir Scott Peebles, sergeant-surgeon to the

Queen, declined the honour of Doctor Asprey's acquaintance, and when the Doctor did not receive the appointment of physician extraordinary, for which several of the newspapers had designated him, people said it was owing to Sir Scott's influence at court. Wondering why the usually benevolent old baronet should be so inimical towards his brother practitioner, people remembered that Sir Scott was brother to Mr. Donald Peebles, of the firm of Peebles and Murray, who had been the solicitors to an old lady whom Doctor Asprey attended, and whose will in his favour was successfully contested by her relatives. Baron Bronck, head of the English branch of the great European house of Bronck Brothers, refused to receive Doctor Asprey, who had been recommended to attend the baroness in her confinement, and when asked for his reasons, declared simply that he had seen too much of the Doctor's transactions in the City and in the share market, to have a desire for any farther acquaintance with him.

Of course stories like these had their exactly opposite stories, to balance them. Doctor Asprey's friends declared that old Doctor Tileoff was a lunatic, who ought to hold his consultations in a padded room, and that the story about Mrs. Asprey was a figment of the old man's muddled brain, warped and twisted by his knowledge of the fact that Doctor Asprey had long since pronounced him imbecile and unfit to give any medical opinion. The animosity exhibited by Sir Scott Peebles was attributed to pro-

fessional jealousy of a younger man, who was rapidly ousting the senile baronet from his position and his practice; while as regards Baron Bronck, it was averred that Doctor Asprey had taken his natural acumen into the City with him; and in investigating certain concerns vouched for by Bronck Brothers, had discovered—well—Doctor Asprey's friends would say no more—but when the next panic came, let Bronck Brothers and their clients look out. So there was a pro-Asprey party and anti-Asprey party, but the former was by far the largest, and the Doctor's popularity and practice were immense.

His appearance was decidedly in his favour. A tall, upright man, with high forehead and regular features, iron-gray hair and whiskers, and white teeth; always dressed in a dark-blue closely buttoned frock-coat and gray trousers, black high neckerchief, the whitest of linen, and the brightest of boots. His manner earnest without being grave, and pleasant without being undignified; his smile infrequent, but marvellously winning when it came; his interest in the person whom he was addressing intense and undivided. Such outwardly was John Asprey, M.D., of Cavendish-square, and principal physician to St. Vitus's Hospital.

"The very man we were wishing to see," repeated Mr. Delabole, as the Doctor entered, and having given the hands of each of his friends a strong squeeze—there was always immense meaning in his hand-shake—sank gracefully into an easy-chair.

"I am delighted to hear you say so," said the Doctor; "not frightened of me? 'Nec Asprey terrent,' to make once more my oft-repeated joke. Some men are always uneasy in the presence of a doctor, but with a chest and a constitution like yours, my dear Delabole—"

"Yes," interrupted Mr. Delabole, who was, nevertheless, chafing under the Doctor's fixed look; for he was perfectly conscious of the inelegance of his figure, and hated any attention being called to it; "quite so, as you say. And what is the news this morning?"

"I have not yet seen the paper," said the Doctor, unconsciously parodying a great statesman. "That was a charming dinner we had last night. I fully expected to see you there, Mr. Vane," he continued, turning to Philip.

"Mrs. Bendixen was good enough to ask me," replied Vane; "but I was unfortunately detained here until it was too late to go home and dress; the slave of the lamp, you know, Doctor."

"Why not, my dear Mr. Vane," said the Doctor, bending forward with a pleasant smile, "why not transform yourself into the slave of the ring? Do you blush? Is there any truth in the rumours which the little birds are whispering about?"

"The little birds are canards, Doctor, and you know what faith is to be put in them."

"I think not," said the Doctor placidly, "I think not, or a lovely ear, which I noticed last night, more lovely by far than the diamond which it held, would have listened more graciously to the honey sweet which

one of the company present was endeavouring to instil into it."

"Indeed," said Philip; "one of the company present; and who might that be?"

"The Doctor himself," said Delabole, "of course."

"Not I—not I, indeed," said Doctor Asprey. "A man much younger, much handsomer, and more likely in every way to win favour in the eyes of a peerless lady—Mr. Gerald Hardinge."

"Ah, by the way," said Mr. Delabole, rising and drawing a heavy curtain across the door, which opened into the outer office, "let us hear all you know about that young gentleman."

"All I know is not very much," said Doctor Asprey. "I first met him some two years ago at the house of Mrs. Entwistle, an eccentric old woman, whom I was called in to attend for a spinal complaint under which she had long been suffering, and which so cripples her that she has lost all power of motion, and even in the house is wheeled about in a chair. I saw this young fellow in constant attendance upon the old lady, discussing her case with me, giving orders to the servants, &c., and I naturally imagined that he was Mrs. Entwistle's grandson. It was not until lately that I discovered that he is in no way related to her; that before she had ever seen him the old lady took a fancy to some pictures he had painted, and sent to London for sale; that when he called upon her she took a great affection to him, declaring him strongly to resemble some dead member of her family, and

that he has, ever since, remained with her as her adopted son."

"Deuced pleasant for him," said Mr. Delabole. "Why didn't some nice old lady take a fancy to me when I was a lad?"

"Yes," said Philip Vane, "and teach you to play cribbage instead of baccarat, and Pope Joan instead of three-card loo! What a comfort you would have been at the old lady's fireside!"

"Young Hardinge has been remarkably steady, I understand, and will reap the benefit of his prudence by inheriting all Mrs. Entwistle's money," said Doctor Asprey, cutting in.

"Is that certain?" asked Mr. Delabole.

"Certain!" said Doctor Asprey. "I had it from Platting, who is her attorney."

"And how long is Mrs. Entwistle likely to live?" asked Philip Vane.

"Not more than two months," said the Doctor, "but in all probability nothing like so much; her life hangs on a thread; she may expire at any moment."

"Then the sooner we make young Hardinge's acquaintance the better," said Mr. Delabole.

"Will you meet him at dinner at my house on—say Tuesday next," said the Doctor, looking at his note-book; "and you, too, Mr. Vane?"

Both of them said they should be delighted.

And so Madge Pierrepont's husband, and the man who had loved Madge Pierrepont so dearly, were about to be brought face to face!

CHAPTER V.

"Scene : a Street in Lyons."

SUCH of the good people of Springside as took an interest in the affairs of their neighbours (and they were by no means a small proportion of the population), were both astonished and disappointed at no match being made up between the Reverend Onesiphorus Drage and the pretty widow, to whom the care of his child had been confided during his absence. The story of Mrs. Drage's last request, which was assiduously bruited about immediately after that good lady's death, had been received with a certain amount of discredit, and a large amount of scorn. Virgin noses, brought together in conclave at Dorcas meetings, had sniffed their contempt at Mrs. Pickering's boldness, and wifely lips had laughed in disdain at Mr. Drage's innocence, in thinking that any woman would not merely recommend her husband to fill her place, but would actually nominate her successor. Mr. Drage's temporary absence from Springside, and Mrs. Pickering's quasi-adoption of little Bertha, were regarded by the worthy townspeople as devised by the acuteness of the widow, who, bold as she might be, had not sufficient audacity to permit her courtship by the parson to be carried on "under the noses," as they expressed it, of those who had known his deceased

wife. And when the news was spread that Mr. Drage was coming back, the usual amount of tea-table hospitality received a great impetus, and all the scandal-mongers of the place were expectant of their prey. The question whether Mrs. Pickering would remain at the rectory was for some time debated with the keenest anxiety, until at last it was proved, to the satisfaction of all parties, that, whether she stopped or whether she went, she would be equally wrong. By stopping she would outrage all laws of society, and it would be a question whether a statement of the facts ought not to be submitted to the bishop; by going she would act most artfully, and take the surest step to induce the rector to invite her to come back to the house as its head.

Even the fact that Mrs. Pickering, immediately after the rector's return, took up quite a new line of life, and entered upon her duties as housekeeper to Sir Geoffry Heriot, the new tenant of Wheatcroft, did not suffice to disabuse the Springsideites of their belief in her ultimate intentions about their rector. Mrs. Pickering had found the parson more difficult to ensnare than she had at first believed, said the worthy townsfolk to each other, and, though they were by no means aware of it, accredited her as a disciple of Mrs. Peachum's doctrine, "by keeping men off you keep them on." Over the evening muffins and tea-cakes (Springside is renowned for its confectionery, and has given its name to a particularly luscious and sticky kind of bun) were breathed rumours that the house-

keeper had already constituted herself a great favourite with her new master, whom she was reported to be "playing off" against her former employer. That there were reasons for these rumours was generally believed; even the most incredulous could not help admitting that, during the whole time he had held the living, the rector's visits had never been so frequent to any of his parishioners as they were now to Wheatcroft. So ran the gossips' talk, which like nearly all gossips' talk, however exaggerated, had some truth in it.

After the first shock of her revelation to him that she was no widow, but a woman who had been deserted by a husband yet alive, Mr. Drage had determined upon the line of conduct which he would for the future pursue in regard to Mrs. Pickering, and had carried it out to the letter.

"There is an end, then," he said to her, after a few minutes had passed away, and the first shock of astonishment and grief had subsided, "there is an end, then, to my dream of the last twelvemonth! It passes away as other dreams have passed before it; name, and fame, and—health; I have dreamed of all, and found none! It is wisely ordained, doubtless," he continued, "but—it is a great blow. I had built so on it; why, I know not, for, try my hardest, I could never find any expression in your letters which would lead me to believe you understood my feelings towards you; yet I had built so on it, I can scarcely believe even now that the whole fabric lies shattered at a word. We shall still be friends though, now?"

"Surely we shall still be friends!" she replied; "you cannot for an instant think that what you have said to me just now could cause any alteration in the regard and gratitude which I have always felt towards you."

"No," he said, somewhat nervously, "I suppose not."

"Rather," she continued, "should you think what perfect trust I must have in you to confide to you the secret of my life. There is no one else in the whole world who knows of my marriage; the fact has been concealed even from my sister; it is known but to me—and to him!"

There was a lengthened pause, during which, though Mr. Drage sat with his face shaded by his hand, it was evident he was under the influence of deep emotion. When he looked up again there were traces of tears upon his cheeks, and his voice was unsteady as he said, "Will—will what has happened make any difference in your decision upon Captain Cleethorpe's proposition?"

"No," she said, "it will not."

"And your decision is—?" he asked.

"To accept it without doubt," she replied. "Even had I a choice of the ways of life, I do not think I should hesitate in accepting what has been offered to me in such a kindly spirit, and which, quite peaceful and retired as it must be, will suit me so well. That illness from which, under Providence, I was rescued by your kindness, robbed me of a certain amount of

youthful strength, and left me unfitted for any very active employment; besides, I have formed friendships here, which I should regret giving up, and I should scarcely have the heart to commence anew in a strange place."

"You are right," said the rector, still sitting with averted face. "It was selfish, indeed, to imagine for an instant that you could come to any other decision. And it would not much matter to me," he added, struggling with his breaking voice; "my stay must be so very short."

The peculiarity of his manner struck Madge instantly.

"What do you mean, Mr. Drage?" she asked, laying her hand lightly on his sleeve.

"Simply," he said, removing his hand from his face, in which burned the hectic flush, which always fluttered there when under mental excitement, "I mean I could not trust myself to be near you, to be frequently brought within the charm of your presence, under the spell of your voice, without thinking of you as I have done during—during all the time I have been abroad. There was no sin in it then, Heaven knows! What I dared to hope in regard to you had been hoped by my dead wife, and was thought of almost as much in the interest of my little child as my own! Had you been free, and had rejected me, I should still have hoped, and hoping died; but what you have told me to-day renders such a thought of you a sin, and—and I am too weak to fight against it."

When he ceased he leaned back in his chair, apparently quite overcome.

"You misjudge your own strength, Mr. Drage," said Madge, bending towards him; "you don't know yourself so well as I know you; you are physically weak just now, and overwrought by this interview, which has, indeed, been sufficiently trying to both of us, but after a few days' rest you will be yourself again, and you will find your inclination keeping you where your duty lies, sentinel at this outpost which has been committed to your keeping."

"You think so?" he asked anxiously.

"I am sure of it," she replied. "Do not let me think that, with the full knowledge that you could be nothing more to me than a friend, you would refuse me that friendship, that counsel and comfort, of which I stand so much in need. It would be hard indeed that the fact of my having confided to you the secret of my forlorn position, should have lost me that regard which I valued most!"

"My own folly would have been the cause, not what you told me," he interrupted.

"What I told you would have brought about the result which I am showing you," she replied. "And, again, where would the peaceful, happy future, which I have pictured to myself, be for me, with the thought that my remaining here had driven you out from amongst the people who love you, and with whom so many happy years of your life had been spent? Where would be my peace of mind when I reflected that all

this wretchedness would have been spared to you and yours, had I not come among you in a false name and under a false pretence?"

He motioned with his hand for her to cease, then said in a low tone, "You must not speak thus of yourself."

"I must," she said, "for it is true! If you would silence me, accept the position I offer you and entreat you to take—be my dear, dear friend, helping me, as you have done, to fight the battle here, and to look for the reward—hereafter!"

And amid the tears which fell like rain down his wan cheeks she heard him say solemnly:

"I will!"

Not another word was uttered, but the compact which was entered into was nevertheless religiously kept.

The next morning Captain Cleethorpe called upon Mrs. Pickering, and heard with great delight that she had determined on accepting the position which he had offered her, and seldom had the retired Indian officer cared to express his pleasure more openly.

"I don't mind telling you now, Mrs. Pickering," said he, "but this has been quite a pet project of mine. I was a bit doubtful about the padre at one time, and fond of him as I am, as we all are indeed, I should have been glad if he could have postponed his arrival for a few days. I knew the great interest he took in you, and I thought he might feel that the house of an old retired Indian officer, no matter how old or how retired, might scarcely be a fit place for

you. However, I shall take an early opportunity of bringing Mr. Drage and Sir Geoffry Heriot together, and I am sure that they will get on remarkably well. What I want you to understand, and what I am sure you will feel as soon as you have been a few days at Wheatcroft, is that your position of housekeeper will be simply a nominal one. By this I mean to say that it must have some name, and as you cannot be called military secretary, or commissary-general, or aide-de-camp, one is obliged to fall back upon the ordinary British formula. If I had had my way, I would have had you called chief of the staff; and if the old General only appreciates you as much as I expect, you will find your position both a confidential and a pleasant one."

Captain Cleethorpe's predictions came true to the letter. When, a few days afterwards, Sir Geoffry Heriot arrived at Wheatcroft, and Mrs. Pickering was personally introduced to him, with admirable tact, by the Captain, she found in her new employer a man accustomed to command, so accustomed, indeed, as to be not unwilling to slip out of his buckram suit, and to have the burden of responsibility removed to other shoulders. Time had whitened Sir Geoffry's iron-gray hair, leaving it massed and curling as before, and blanched his small moustache, but the bronzed cheeks shone even more deeply red, in contrast with the white hair, and, under the bushy eyebrows, the glance of the dark eyes was prompt and expressive as ever.

Little time did it take Sir Geoffry Heriot to ap-

preciate the character and qualities of the new addition to his domestic circle. He had written for a housekeeper, and had expected to find a stout, elderly personage, of motherly presence and dubious grammar, who would take care that his dinners were ordered, his rooms dusted, and his linen aired; and would act as a species of buffer between himself and his tradespeople. What he found was, a young and handsome woman of good education, refined and lady-like in her manner; such a woman, in fact, as he might have met with on the rare occasions when he accepted some of his brother officers' hospitality in India, but such a one as he had not been brought into close or frequent contact with since his youthful days. Over the old man, strict disciplinarian, bitter hardened cynic, and woman-hater as he was, Madge Pierrepont exercised her accustomed influence. Not that, for one instant, Sir Geoffry Heriot dreamed of falling in love with her; the absurdity of such a proceeding in a man of his age towards a woman of hers, and the difference in their respective positions (a difference never insisted on, but, at the same time, never forgotten), would have prevented his allowing himself so to blunder, even had he the smallest inclination. But he did not disguise from himself that the perpetual presence of such a woman around and about him, had a certain softening and refining influence, and that, week by week, his consideration for her increased, as she rendered herself more and more essential to his well-being, and to the comfort of all around him.

This influence was shown in odd and various ways. To Captain Cleethorpe, as a man of good position in his own profession, as the intimate ally of his friend, Colonel Goole, and as a gentleman who had taken some trouble in regard to the purchase of Wheatcroft, Sir Geoffry was polite, and, to a certain extent, genial, placing himself, as it were, under the Captain's wing, so far as the Springside society was concerned, accepting introductions to the retired Indians, both military and civil, at the club, and altogether so conducting himself as to give his acquaintances reason to believe that the stories of his cold hauteur, which had heralded his advent, were exaggerated, if not absolutely false. But when Captain Cleethorpe, a few days after Sir Geoffry's arrival, drove out to Wheatcroft, taking with him the Reverend Onesiphorus Drage, the new tenant of that pleasant abode relapsed into such a state of ramrod stiffness, and curt phraseology, as rendered the visit anything but a pleasant one.

Determined not to be discouraged, on the next occasion of his meeting with the old officer, Captain Cleethorpe mentioned Mr. Drage's name, which elicited from Sir Geoffry an expression of his contempt for what he was pleased to term "psalm smiting," and of his aversion to the clerical profession in general. Captain Cleethorpe did not pursue the subject, but took occasion later on, in the presence of other persons, to whom he apparently addressed himself, to tell the story of the manner in which Mr. and Mrs. Drage had

tended Mrs. Pickering, during the illness which attacked her on her first arrival in Springside, and had devoted themselves to her on her recovery.

Sir Geoffry said nothing at the time, but he requested Mrs. Pickering's attendance in the library that evening, and after handing her to a chair with as much ceremony as he would have shown in the old days to the wife of the Governor-General, he spoke to her on a few unimportant topics, and gradually led her to speak of the commencement of her first acquaintance with Mr. Drage. Madge, who knew nothing of the reception which the rector had experienced at Sir Geoffry's hands, spoke, as she felt, in the warmest and most enthusiastic manner of her old friend. And the next day Sir Geoffry called at the rectory, and took especial care to obliterate any traces of the ill-feeling which might be lingering in Mr. Drage's mind.

The acquaintance, thus strangely begun, speedily ripened. It was impossible for any one to be thrown much in company with the rector, so simple-minded in worldly matters, so steadfast and earnest in his calling, without becoming interested in him. Sir Geoffry Heriot had met no such specimen of man before; during his career in India he had always regarded the regimental chaplain in the light of an objectionable, though necessary excrescence, and since his return home he had paid but little attention to the public rites of religion, or to those administering them. But he became so profoundly impressed with the views and conversation of his new-made friend when "out

of the wood," as, in his old style of garrison slang, he was accustomed to speak of it, that Mr. Drage, rising in the reading-desk one Sunday, was astonished to find himself confronted by the martial figure of the old General, who paid strict attention to the service, and, on the next occasion of the rector's visit to Wheatcroft, was remarkably stringent in his criticism on the curate's sermon.

The plunge once made, the Sunday visit to the church became a regular habit, and the intercourse between this oddly-assorted pair of friends was much increased thereby.

The first and chief point of interest between them was, of course, their common regard for Mrs. Pickering. To sing her praises; to talk of her, as, indeed, he felt towards her now, after the schooling to which he had necessarily subjected himself, with something like brotherly affection; to dwell upon the regard which she had inspired in his dead wife, and the worship in which she was held by his little child, was the rector's greatest delight. To this hymn of praise the old General growled a supplementary chorus. The knowledge which, in the short time, he had gained of his friend's singleness of purpose and simplicity of character, rendered him confident of the sincerity of the rector's expressed opinion about Mrs. Pickering, and Sir Geoffry often wondered why Mr. Drage had never attempted to supply the place of his late wife by one whom the deceased lady esteemed so highly. "Perhaps the very reason!" the old warrior said 'grimly

to himself; "if the rector is ever to fall a victim again, it will probably be to a totally different sort of person, some prattling, flirting jade, who will amuse herself by worrying his old age, and snubbing her step-daughter."

With little Bertha, indeed, Sir Geoffry did not make friends. When, as not unfrequently happened, she accompanied her father to Wheatcroft, she almost invariably remained with Mrs. Pickering, while the gentlemen were smoking in the library or in the garden: and when occasionally the General came across her, he bestowed upon her but a slight and ceremonious greeting, in no way in accordance with his usual manner towards his adult visitors. Madge noticed this, but said nothing.

One day Bertha was unwell. The next day Mr. Drage came tearing up to Wheatcroft in a fly, to announce that the doctor had declared the illness to be one of childhood's diseases in a virulent form, and to implore Mrs. Pickering's assistance, if Sir Geoffry would consent to her going to the little patient, already clamouring for her.

Both agreed at once, the one heartily, the other graciously, and Madge went, and was away from Wheatcroft for four days, installed in the sick-chamber.

Those were dull days for Sir Geoffry Heriot. He missed the companionship he had grown accustomed to, and rebelled against the chance which had deprived him of it. The old, hard, cynical spirit in which he had erst revelled, came back upon him, and

made itself his master once more; Riley and the other servants, who, under Madge's sway, imagined they had enjoyed a foretaste of Paradise, found out the difference, and were quickly relegated to the Inferno. If Mr. Drage could have come, he might have had some softening influence, but he was of course in constant attendance on his sick child.

When Mrs. Pickering returned she went straight into the library, where Sir Geoffry sat over his newspaper. He rose to receive her, and offered his hand, in an old-fashioned, ceremonious manner.

"You are welcome back," said he. "I am glad to see you."

"The child is out of danger," said Madge, without reference to his remarks; "the doctor says she will live."

"I suppose that is a matter for congratulation?" said Sir Geoffry coldly.

"You suppose, Sir Geoffry?"

"I have known a child grow up to be a disgrace to his father, and a girl become a woman when she had better have died in childhood."

Madge looked at him. His face was set, and gray, and rigid, and, looking at it, she held her peace.

But she guessed what she had often suspected before, that Sir Geoffry was the victim of some domestic trouble. What his previous private life had been she knew not; she had never inquired. All she knew of him was learned from himself, and he had never hinted at wife or family; but in the tone of his voice,

and in the hardness of his manner, Madge recognised something more than his ordinary cynicism, and made up her mind that, in his reference to Bertha, he was alluding to a daughter of his own who had brought trouble upon him.

The subject had an unpleasant fascination for her, and at last she determined upon speaking about it to Captain Cleethorpe, who had been acquainted with Sir Geoffry for many years, and would doubtless be able to set her mind at rest. So she seized her opportunity and spoke to him.

Had Sir Geoffry been married? Captain Cleethorpe thought undoubtedly. Was the lady dead? Captain Cleethorpe thought no question of it. Had there been any family? Yes. A girl? Not that Captain Cleethorpe knew of. A boy, who had died? No, Captain Cleethorpe could not say he had died; the fact was—shy of mentioning these sort of things generally, don't you know, but between us, intimately connected with Sir Geoffry, Mrs. Pickering, it don't matter—the fact was the boy had gone to grief, and nobody had ever known exactly what had become of him.

Gone to grief? Captain Cleethorpe meant that the young man had deserted his home, and perhaps been discarded by his friends. Madge found herself frequently cogitating about this boy. His position must be like Gerald's, she thought, as Gerald was when she knew him; but, according to Rose's account, Gerald had now been restored to his friends, and was living in happiness and affluence. Could not a similar re-

conciliation be effected between Sir Geoffry and his son? From what she could make out from Captain Cleethorpe, sufficient time had passed to dull the keen edge of such injuries as either father or son might have imagined they had received. She would try her influence with Sir Geoffry, but first she must find out who the young man was, and where and what he was then doing.

This discovery she made in an unexpected manner. Sir Geoffry had begged her to go through the contents of an old bullock trunk, which, on his arrival, had been stowed in the housekeeper's room; but which, when he came upon it in the course of a tour of inspection, he pronounced mouldy and broken, and only worthy of being got rid of. The contents were many and various. Some books, damp and musty smelling; several suits of light clothing intended for a hot climate, but now stained and mildewed; two or three faded uniform sashes; bits of dull and tarnished lace; a number of Indian newspapers tied together in a roll; and many letters and memoranda huddled together in hopeless confusion at the bottom of the trunk. Madge went carefully through this heterogeneous mass, and had put aside a certain number of papers for destruction, and another lot to await Sir Geoffry's decision, when, in taking up a letter, an enclosure dropped from it. It was a water-colour sketch, roughly but cleverly done, of a street in an old French town. Looking at it, she seemed to recognise the place at once as one perfectly familiar to her. There was the great two

towered cathedral, with the market-place at its base, full of life and bustle; there were the cafés and the estaminet, with a big wooden barrel as a sign swinging over its portal; there was the cooper's, with the billets of wood lying in front of his door; the glove-maker's, with the great wooden hand; there were even the hooded cabriolets, in which the peasantry had come in from the rural districts, and the dogs dragging the produce-laden barrows. Here it all was, just exactly as she had seen it. Seen it? she had never been abroad, and yet every detail in the picture was perfectly familiar to her.

Thinking it over, she had a strange recollection of Dobson, the manager at Wexeter, in a uniform and cocked-hat, and Mr. Boodle also in uniform, and old Minneken in tights and Hessian boots, with tassels to them—yes, now it all came back to her! Dobson was General Damas, Boodle was Claude Melnotte, and Minneken was Beauséant, the play was the *Lady of Lyons*, and the scene was one which Gerald Hardinge had painted for the Wexeter Theatre! They had all admired it, she remembered; they had all said, such of them as knew anything about it, how wonderfully true to nature it was. And Gerald had laughed, and said he had drawn it from an early recollection. Nay, more, if she had wanted farther corroboration, there were the initials "G. H." in the corner of the sketch.

How did Sir Geoffry Heriot come into possession of a sketch done years ago by Gerald Hardinge? The

letter would tell her that. She took it up and read it. It was written in a boy's round hand, dated from Lille, and commenced, "My dear father." Dull and uninteresting enough, written as though to order, detailing the course of his studies, and the unvarying manner of his life. It expressed a hope that the person to whom it was addressed would return in good health, and that they should soon meet. The last paragraph ran thus:

I think you will say that since I addressed you six months ago, I have made some improvement in my drawing; I take great interest in it, and am very fond of it. I send you a sketch of our market-place, which I copied from nature, and which, the professor says, is very good.

Your affectionate son,

GEORGE HERIOT.

As the letter fluttered to the ground, Madge Pierrepoint knew that Sir Geoffry Heriot's discarded son, and the scene-painter, Gerald Hardinge, were one and the same man.

CHAPTER VI.

The Woman of the World.

A COUNTRY cousin taken by his metropolitan host down Biffen-street, Park-lane, and told that the houses in that narrow and somewhat dingy locality were among the most tempting lots offered by fashionable house-agents to moneyed commerce desiring to establish itself in the regions of fashion, would surely be very much surprised. True that there is about them that surrounding of mews and small public-house seemingly inseparable from desirable residences. True that they are situate in the heart of that exclusive quarter, which is, as it were, the Faubourg St. Germain of London, concentrating within its limits the old families, and looking down with contempt upon Belgravia and Tyburnia. True that the drainage is imperfect, and that the rates are enormous. Granting all these advantages, the country cousin might yet be excused for wondering at there being anything like a struggle for the possession of a residence in Biffen-street.

For what he would see would be short rows of high-shouldered, tall houses, separated by a narrow, ill-paved street, with—running across it at right angles—another street, in which are horse-dealers' yards, and small chandlers' shops, and struggling dairies, and other attempts at domestic commerce on a very small scale. The doors of the houses in Biffen-street are so

tiny, that one wonders how the enormous giants in plush, who, on fine summer evenings, are to be seen sunning themselves at the portals, manage to squeeze through them; the windows looking upon the street are old-fashioned and airless, with small panes frequently not too clean, and sashes from which the paint is worn away; the areas are deep and narrow black tanks, and the houses, so far as outward appearance is concerned, are certainly not more desirable than those to be found in the lodging-letting purlieus of Russell-square.

But once inside, our supposed country cousin would find everything changed, and would speedily be able to understand why Biffen-street commands such high rents, and is so eagerly competed for. For on the west side, at least, the façade to the street is merely a brick delusion or a stucco snare, the fronts of the houses being, Hibernically speaking, at the back; the narrow-paned windows are either dummies, or might be, for all the use that is made of them, enshrouded as they are in bowers of luxurious creeping plants, or hidden away behind ferneries and aquaria; the rooms in the houses are not numerous, but nearly all are large, lofty, and well-proportioned, with great bay windows, which, chiefest charm of all, overlook the broad expanse of Hyde Park.

In a large room on the first floor of one of the best of these houses, on a sofa of peculiar make, with stuffed handles at either end, and small covered wheels in place of the ordinary castors, a woman lay

with her face turned towards the window, and her head thrown back to catch as much as possible of the soft evening air. The lower half of the walls was fitted with book-shelves, the upper half hung with a few rare prints and engravings; the mantelpiece was above the height of an ordinary man's stature, the fireplace was tiled, and the space which in winter was occupied by the "dogs," was filled in with looking-glass, in front of which were pots of rare flowers. The furniture, which was massive and antique, was in black oak and dark blue velvet; the thick carpet was of a sombre Persian pattern, and the whole room had the appearance of a studious man's library. But it was a woman of the world's boudoir, and its owner lay on the sofa at the window.

A tall woman, of some three-and-fifty years of age, of whom the young men of the day are accustomed to say that "she must once have been good-looking." If clear cut features, soft dark hair and eyes, and shapely figure constitute beauty, she is more than good-looking still. Her complexion is very pale, and constant suffering has left a half-worn, half-irritable expression visible in tell-tale lines round her mouth and brow; but her eyes are full of fire, and no physiognomist would fail to mark the firmness and determination evinced in the tight-closing of her lips, as she wrestles and battles with the sharp spasms of pain, which from time to time assail her. Unmistakably well-born and well-nurtured; dressed in a long flowing black cashmere robe, which, hanging in folds

over her feet, is confined by a girdle round her waist; with a line of soft white muslin round the throat, and with a piece of handsome black lace brought down in a point, after the fashion of a modern widow's cap, on to her forehead, and falling gracefully over her shoulders.

Twilight has deepened into darkness, the rumble of a few carriages driving to entertainments in the now fast decaying season is only occasional, and the hum of the people, who wearied out by their day's labour, or of the children who, cooped up in courts and alleys, have come to sit and play about on the greensward, to try and get some notion, however faint, of what the country may be like, has died away; but the occupant of the sofa still lies at the window, gazing out wearily and listlessly over the broad expanse before her. A shaded reading-lamp stands on a small table by her side, and a book with a library ticket pasted on it has fallen to the floor from the hand which hangs in weariness on the back of the sofa; but since that access of pain which had caused her to drop the volume, she has made no attempt to move, and there she lies, still, and mute, and uncomplaining.

Through the darkness glides a small, neat, womanly figure, until it reaches the sofa side, where it stops. There has been no sound of footfall, no rustling of dress, but the lady seems aware of the presence, for she turns her head quietly and says in a full, rich voice, "You there, Willis?"

"Yes, madam, I came to tell you it had struck eleven."

"A work of supererogation, and as such to be avoided! The neighbouring churches are of use to me in one way at all events; I learn the flight of time from their clocks, if not from their preachers. What then?"

"Are you not ready for the morphia and for bed?" said the girl. "Are you not tired, madam?"

"Tired!" echoed the invalid. "Good Heaven! if you only knew how tired I am of everything, and yet how unwilling to give it up! Yes, Willis, I am tired, but I don't intend going to bed just yet."

"Doctor Asprey begged me to see that you were not up later than eleven."

"When you are Doctor Asprey's lady's-maid, you will attend to what he says; while you remain with me, you will obey me alone. I shall not leave this room until Mr. Gerald returns."

The girl had been too long in her mistress's service to attempt to argue with her, so she merely bowed, and was about to retire when the lady stopped her by a gesture.

"Stay," she said, "do not leave me, Willis; I have been alone now for a couple of hours, and there is no society I get so soon sick of as my own. That was a bad attack I had just now."

"It was, indeed, madam," said the girl earnestly, "a very bad one."

"You thought I was dying, Willis?" said the lady, looking fixedly at her, with a smile upon her lips.

"I confess that I was very frightened," said Willis.

"As frightened as you were three years ago when we were in Greece?"

"Do you mean, madam, when we were at Mite—Mite—"

"At Mitylene."

"Yes! You looked so exactly the same, madam, this evening, as you did then."

"I felt exactly the same, Willis; that curious languor, that sense of my hold on life gradually, but surely, relaxing; that impossibility to fight against the icy numbness stealing over me; all those sensations I had at Mitylene. I had almost forgotten them until they were renewed to-night. Now tell me, what did Doctor Asprey say to you on the stairs?"

"He said—" and the girl's voice hesitated, and her cheeks flushed as she spoke, "he said that—that you had been very ill, madam; but that you were better."

"That was oracular, indeed," said the invalid, smiling. "Did you come into my service yesterday, Willis? or do you take me for a fool, that you think to put me off with such nonsense? Tell me plainly, what did the doctor say?"

The girl hesitated again, but the invalid's eyes were fixed upon her, and she proceeded. "Doctor Asprey said, madam, that he had only arrived just in time to—to 'pull you through,' were his words, and that if you had another attack he—you—"

"I should die in it, I suppose," said the invalid quietly.

"He would not answer for the consequences, was what the doctor said."

"It is pretty much the same thing! And you were frightened to tell me this? Have you not seen me for years looking death in the face, as it were, and do you think that the hint of its nearer approach could have any effect upon me? I told you, when you first came to me, that there was a chance of my dying at any moment, and that you would probably have to get your character for your next place from my executors, and now—Did I not hear the street-door shut? Mr. Gerald is returned, he will come straight to this room. There are tears in your eyes, Willis; dry them at once, and get away before he comes; you know how quick and observant he is."

Obedying this order, Willis hurried from the room. She had scarcely done so, when Gerald Hardinge, entering, walked straight to the sofa and seated himself in a low chair beside it, taking one of its occupant's hands between his.

Rose Pierrepont was right in saying that Gerald's personal appearance had greatly improved since the old days. His face had a colour in it, which it lacked then, and his strong active figure was set off by well-cut clothes. His voice, always soft and refined, sounded singularly sweet, as, bending over the figure on the sofa, and lightly kissing its forehead, he said, "Why do I find you up so late, to-night; is not this dissipation against all orders?"

"This dissipation, as you call it, has occurred

wholly and solely on your account. I sat up to see you."

"It is all very well to say that," said Gerald, laughing, "but you were always addicted to frivolity, and you have been amusing yourself, I know, with watching the people in the Park."

"My dear Gerald, even the philanderings of tall guardsmen with short plain cooks, and the pastimes of dirty children, have ceased to inspire me with much interest. That was all to be seen while daylight remained, and it has been dark for the last two hours."

"And yet you have remained here—I was going to say reading, but the position of the book," pointing to it, "is scarcely complimentary to the author."

"The book," said the invalid, glancing at the fallen volume, "is the usual accurate description of fashionable life from the scullery-maid's point of view. No, I have been amusing myself in thinking."

"Thinking of what?"

"Many things and persons, you among the number; but I will not inflict upon you an inventory of my thoughts, at all events just now. You dined with Doctor Asprey. Had you a pleasant party? Who were there?"

"Only two other men, neither of whom I think you know, a Mr. Delabole and a Mr. Vane."

"I have met Mr. Delabole, a coarse, common vulgarian, pushing and presuming; just the style of person one expects to find at Madame Uffizzi's, where

I met him, and who is invited by her on account of business relations with her husband. Who is the other man, one of the Northumberland Vanes?"

"I should think not," said Gerald, laughing; "a pleasing, rattling, agreeable kind of fellow, who talked very well. He had to do a goodish deal of talking, by the way, for the doctor was sent for early in the dinner, and was away for an hour."

"What was his summons?"

"To a patient of course, and an urgent case I fancy, for he rose from the table directly his most mysterious butler whispered in his ear. I need not tell you that he did not mention the name or the case."

"Doctor Asprey is a model of discretion," said the invalid, with a faint smile; then leaning a little towards her companion, and laying her hand on his, she added, "Would it surprise you, my dear Gerald, to hear that it was to see me that Doctor Asprey left his friends?"

"You!" echoed the young man.

"Me. After you left the house, I had warning of a bad attack, and when its imminence became certain, I thought it better that the doctor should be here to stave it off, if possible."

"And you hadn't a thought to send for me at such a time," said the young man, bending tenderly over her, but speaking in tones of reproach.

"What good could it have done?" she asked. "I knew you were enjoying yourself, and life is too short

to let slip any such opportunity. You could have done me no good, and the sight of you, and the thought that I was leaving you, would not have rendered death more pleasant to me."

"You must not speak like that," said Gerald gently.

"And why not?" said the invalid, with a smile; "the fact will not be averted or postponed by our ignoring it, and I have a strong conviction that my hold on life, which of late years has been sufficiently feeble, is gradually relaxing altogether."

"What makes you think that?" he said, in a low, tremulous voice.

"I do not think it," she replied; "I know it. Five or six years ago I went for a tour in the East alone, that is to say, with Willis for my sole companion; while in Constantinople I had a severe attack of rheumatism, and was recommended by a French physician, who attended me, to try the baths of Vassilica, in the island of Mitylene, which, at one time, were famous for their cure of such disorders. I went to Mitylene, and found it paradise; and when you have no longer this old woman to tie you to this detestable place, you must go there, Gerald, and recompense yourself for having given up a portion of your youth to her love of your companionship."

"If it pleases you to speak in this way, of course it is not for me to check you," said the young man, shrugging his shoulders.

"There," said the invalid, "I will say no more on that head since it displeases you, but will continue

my story. The baths did me good, and the climate rendered me quite another being; it seemed to me that, for the first time, I knew what life was, as distinguished from existence. I forgot that perpetual gnawing pain which had never left me for so many years, and I began to think it not impossible that in time I should have some toleration for my fellow-creatures. Willis thought the Golden Age had arrived, and I had some idea of taking up my quarters there for good, and establishing myself as a kind of civilised Lady Hester Stanhope among the Greek rayahs, when something happened which changed all my intentions. Close to Mitylene is a place called Lovochari, or the Village of the Lepers, a terrible place, where the people so afflicted are herded together. I had been warned not to go, but I persisted, and dearly I paid for my obstinacy. The sight was terrific, and once seen, was impossible to be got rid of. All day, after my return, I tried to shut it from my mental vision, but there it remained, and at night the hideous objects which I had seen rose before me more terrible than ever; I suppose the fatigue and the horror under which I laboured had something to do with it, but that night I experienced a new phase in my illness. During Willis's temporary absence from the room I fell into a comatose state, a kind of trance, in the commencement of which I felt my life, as it were, gradually slipping away from me; I seemed to be growing weaker and weaker, pulseless, dead; for I was dead, so far as power of motion, thought, or feeling

was concerned. I need not tell you how I was brought round, or bore you with the details of my recovery, which was as sudden as had been the attack. I need only say, my dear Gerald, that this evening I have gone through an exactly similar phase of my illness, and that I know that Doctor Asprey thinks that the wolf, whose approach has been so often announced, is about to come down upon me at last."

Overcome by emotion, the young man sat silent, only pressing the hand which he held between his own.

"Do not think that I am going to be sentimental, my dear Gerald," continued the invalid, "or that I intend saying to you any 'last words,' or any nonsense of that kind. Notwithstanding all my ailments, I have amused myself sufficiently in life, and I am human enough to care sufficiently about such low creature comforts as good eating and drinking, warmth and luxury, not to be overjoyed at the prospects of having speedily to give them up; as for parting from you, I never intend to hint at the subject. I hope that one evening we shall say good-night as usual—there, now, I am drifting into the very sentimental nonsense that I wish to avoid. What I have to say and must say is purely practical. It will be no surprise to you to hear that I have left you all I have in the world."

His head was averted, and for an instant he made no response; when he turned round his cheeks were burning.

"It seems horrible to talk to you in this cold-blooded way," said he, "after all your goodness to me, and at such a moment, but you have given me an opportunity which I have long wanted, and which I must not miss. What I want to say is, to say in all gentleness and affection, that I cannot accept any farther kindness at your hands; that I cannot take this legacy from you to the exclusion of others who have doubtless claims of blood upon you."

The invalid smiled faintly as she said: "Persons with claims of blood I suppose are relations. Providence has kindly spared me any such annoyances! And I think you will allow, before we part to-night, that I have not been acting, nor am I going to act, like a stupid old woman, as the world most probably believes, but that, at all events, there has been method in my madness. Now, Gerald, take this key and open the middle drawer in that cabinet; close to the front you will find a small soft paper parcel—bring it to me."

The young man obeyed. The invalid was about to open the paper, but she refrained.

"Open it yourself," she said.

Gerald took off the outer wrappings of paper, and came upon a miniature painted on ivory, in the style so much in vogue half a century ago.

"Look at it well, and tell me if you know for whom it is intended."

Gerald took the portrait to the lamp and examined it carefully. It represented a young man of about

five-and-twenty years of age, with whiskerless cheeks, and clear blue eyes, and fair hair, curling in a thick crisp mass on his head. He had on a scarlet uniform coat and white duck trousers, and his hand rested on the hilt of a sword.

Glancing at this portrait, Gerald started; bending down to observe it more closely, the colour left his cheeks, and his hand trembled.

"You know the original?" asked the invalid.

"I have seen him," faltered Gerald. "It is, I presume, intended for Sir Geoffry Heriot."

"Exactly," said the invalid. "For your father, George!"

"You know me!" cried Gerald, placing the portrait on a table, and returning to his position by the sofa.

"Certainly, Gerald. I must call you Gerald, I could never get used to George. Certainly, I know you, Gerald!"

"Since when have you known my real name and my position, or rather," he added bitterly, "what ought to have been my position?"

"Before I ever set eyes upon you," said the invalid; "before I purchased those two pictures," pointing to two sketches in oil, resting on one of the cabinets, "which were not great triumphs of art, as you will allow, my dear Gerald, but which it suited me then to pay well for."

"And all this time that I have been living on your bounty, as it were, you knew that I was an impostor;

that the name under which I passed was not my own; the story which I told you of my previous life was a fiction."

"You use harsh language in speaking of yourself, Gerald," said the invalid. "If you had not been who you are, I should have taken no interest in you or your fortune. You cannot suppose, for you are not a vain boy, that a sensible old woman like myself was idiotic enough to have fallen in love with you, and to take an interest in you for your *beaux yeux*. You cannot imagine that, true worldling as I am, I was actuated by philanthropy, or any preposterous motive of that kind, to adopt a young person whom I had never seen, to make him my companion and my heir. No, when I saw you, I liked your appearance and manner; when I came to know you, I learned to love you as my own child; but what induced me in the first instance to send for you—and when I sent for you it was with the determination to hold to you, if you had been as bad as you are good, to give you position, if you had been as totally unfitted as you are totally fitted for it—was the knowledge that you were Geoffry Heriot's discarded son, and that all good fortune accruing to you would be, when he knows it—as he will! as he shall! sooner or later!—gall and wormwood to Geoffry Heriot!"

Gerald had sat open-eyed, regarding with wonder the fire which blazed in her eyes, and the expression of hatred and contempt which swept across her face at each mention of his father's name.

"You speak very harshly of Sir Geoffry Heriot," he said, after a pause.

"I speak harshly because I hate him, but I hate him because I have cause."

"He must have known you well to have had the opportunity of raising such resentment in you?"

"I knew him too well; he embittered the whole current of my life; he—there is no need for any farther mysteries, Gerald," she said, with an effort to calm herself. "I was always waiting for some chance of your hearing my maiden name mentioned in the world, when you would have at once understood the source of my interest in you; but it is so long since I was a girl, and so long since I have been known as Mrs. Entwistle, that people seemed to forget I was once Florence Hastings!"

"Hastings! that was my mother's name," said Gerald quickly, with a beating heart. "Was she related to you?"

"She was my sister," said Mrs. Entwistle quietly.

CHAPTER VII.

Private and Confidential.

AN hour before the revelation made to Gerald Hardinge by Mrs. Entwistle, Doctor Asprey stood in his own hall watching Mr. Delabole, who was taking his hat and light over-coat from the servant.

"What has become of Vane?" asked the great capitalist.

"He has gone back to the dining-room to look for a pencil with which he had been making some memoranda, and which he has left behind him. By the way, Mr. Delabole," continued the doctor, "our friend has, to say the least of it, a certain infirmity of temper. His manner just now, when I was compelled, according to my invariable practice, to refuse him permission to smoke, was almost offensive."

"You took it remarkably well, I must say, my dear doctor; but the fact is, our friend, as you know perfectly, has taken a little too much of your very excellent claret, and is scarcely responsible for his sayings and doings."

"Perhaps so," said Doctor Asprey, "but that doesn't better his conduct in my eyes. I don't pretend, at all events to you, to be squeamish about such matters, but I have a contempt for a man who takes too much wine, and a special contempt for one who is quarrelsome in his cups. *In vino veritas* is a perfectly trustworthy saying; and a man whom good wine turns into a savage is, depend upon it, both undesirable and unreliable as a friend."

"What you say applies generally without doubt," said Mr. Delabole, "though I think you are a little mistaken in the present instance. This conquest of Mrs. Bendixen is a great triumph for Vane, and he is just a thought *tête montée* over it."

"The expression is clever and refined," said the doctor; "but the English equivalent strikes me as being much more applicable in the present instance."

Of such a man, they say in the vernacular, [that he 'cannot stand beans,' and that appears to me graphically descriptive of Mr. Vane's condition. Success has made him insolent, even to those who helped him on his upward path."

"It still lies within the resources of science to double him up, as the Chicken remarked of Mr. Dombey," said Mr. Delabole, with a pleasant smile. "Until that necessity arrives, and so long as he is useful, we will treat him well. Here he is. Now, Philip, the night air, even mild as it is at present, not being particularly beneficial to the health of three hundred guinea brougham horses, perhaps you won't mind hurrying yourself a bit."

"I have been after my pencil-case," said Vane; "it had rolled under the table, and I had an awful bother to get at it."

"It would have been perfectly safe," said the doctor, who seemed to find it impossible to get over his annoyance, "and the servants would have been certain to find it in the morning."

"I wouldn't have let it spend a night under this roof for anything," said Vane, with a thick laugh; "its habit of truth would have deteriorated, and it would have written nothing but humbugging prescriptions, or—"

"There now, come along," said Mr. Delabole, seizing his friend's arm, and hurrying him past the grave servant in black, who stood by the street-door.

"Good-night, doctor. I shall be glad to learn how

matters progress in the Palace Gardens district, if you will take an opportunity of calling upon me in the City."

Whatever sobering influence the calm night air had upon Philip Vane, its effect in sweetening his temper was very small indeed. He puffed angrily and in silence at the cigar which he had lit immediately on entering his friend's brougham, and when he addressed himself to speech, it was only to reiterate the complaints to which Mr. Delabole had already referred.

"What infernal affectation that is in Asprey," he growled, "not letting people smoke in his place; might as well be at one's maiden aunt's in the country, where one has to go into the kitchen after the servants are gone to bed, and puff up the chimney."

"It's because there are so many people of the maiden aunt class, who of necessity visit his house, that the doctor is compelled to be strict. He couldn't possibly have delicate patients coming into a place reeking of tobacco."

"O, of course," said Philip Vane sullenly, "that is always the way now. It is only necessary for me to object to anything that a fellow says or does, for you to become his warmest supporter and most enthusiastic admirer. Now I tell you—"

"Now I tell you," said Mr. Delabole, as the carriage stopped, "here we are. Will you come in and have a drink, or shall the brougham take you home?"

"I will come in and have a talk," said Philip Vane ungraciously; "there are one or two business matters upon which I particularly wish to speak to you."

"All right; in with you," said Mr. Delabole, and with a half-smile and a half-shrug he opened the street-door with his latch-key, and gave his companion admittance.

Mr. Delabole lived in Piccadilly, on the first floor of a large house, the whole of which was let out as chambers. His rooms, handsome in themselves, were handsomely fitted and furnished in what was perhaps a somewhat florid style, but that was the taste of the upholsterer rather than of Mr. Delabole, who, however, found no fault with it. There was a drop of Hebraic blood in Mr. Delabole's veins (the maiden name of his mother, Mrs. Munker, long since deceased, was Rachael Hart, and her residence before marriage Cutler-street, Houndsditch, where her father kept the Net of Lemons), which made him delight in bright colours of rich and gaudy patterns. Everything was just a little overdone: the antique furniture was too old; you waded up to your ankles in the soft velvet pile carpet, and the tall lamps, standing here and there, were so shaded, that all those portions of the room not immediately within their focus were in perfect darkness.

There was plenty of light, however, on a small table laid out with the materials for a choice cold supper, and bearing a handsome stand of spirit decanters. Mr. Vane, entering the room before his host, advanced to this table, smiled contemptuously as he glanced at it, and threw himself into an easy-chair by its side.

"Quite right, my dear Philip," said Mr. Delabole,

bustling into the room; "glad to see you seated at the table; no sensible man goes to bed without something to act as a stay in case he should happen to have one of those confounded fits of waking in the night, no matter how good a dinner he may have eaten. You are going to try a spoonful of that mayonnaise, a morsel of that Roquefort?"

"Not I," said Philip; "it is not every one who can afford to play with his digestion, or his figure, as you can."

"Ah! I forgot," said Mr. Delabole pleasantly, "I am not going to be married to a rich and handsome widow, and to the ladies I adore a spoonful of salad or a crumb of cheese will not make much difference. But you will drink something, I suppose?"

"Yes; what's become of your man, the foreigner?"

"Fritz? He's gone to bed—why?"

"O, nothing; I only thought I should like a glass of beer; I suppose, though, he would have been too much of a fine gentleman to fetch it?"

"My dear fellow, I am not too much of a fine gentleman, at all events. I would run round to the public-house and fetch it myself."

"Don't be an ass, Delabole. It would have been a grand thing though to have seen the great millionaire with a pewter pot in his hand, in the middle of Piccadilly. No, I'll have some brandy; it will be better for me."

He rose as he spoke, and pouring out more than half a tumbler of raw spirit, swallowed a large portion of it, and then filled up the tumbler with iced water.

"I wanted that to pull me together," he said, smacking his lips; "not that I failed in doing justice to the doctor's wine; but when one is a little out of sorts, wine somehow doesn't seem enough, and one wants the grip which brandy gives."

"You can't be out of sorts, surely," said Delabole.

"Nothing really the matter, only a little upset, that is all." His voice was growing a little thick, and he sat glaring before him in a half-stolid, half-defiant manner.

"By the way, what did you think of Gerald Hardinge?" said Delabole, turning upon him suddenly, and closely observing the effect of his question.

Philip Vane's bloodshot eyes gleamed savagely, as he said:

"I hate him!"

"That's a strong sentiment to be roused by a man whom you have never seen before, isn't it? Particularly in you, who are generally such a remarkably cool customer. I suppose, however, that there is hate, as well as love, 'at first sight,' though I confess I don't see what there is to call forth any such feeling toward Mr. Hardinge."

"He's a bumptious, swaggering young idiot," said Vane sullenly.

"No, not quite all that," said Mr. Delabole. "He is bumptious, and swaggering, and young, I admit; but the two first simply result from the last. It is the tendency of youth to swagger. I was very objectionable in that way myself, as a boy, and I can fancy

that even you, my dear Philip, were not the most retiring lad in your school."

"Well, I am not going to chop words with you," said Vane. "I repeat what I said, I hate this fellow!"

"Do you know, I begin to think, Philip, that you are jealous of Mr. Hardinge."

"Jealous!" cried Vane, springing forward from his chair. "What do you mean by that? how could I be jealous of him?"

"What an excitable party it is to-night!" said Mr. Delabole quietly. "Don't you recollect Asprey's telling us about this young fellow whispering to Mrs. Bendixen, and paying her great court one evening when you were not present?"

"O!" said Vane, lying back with an air of relief, "I remember, now you mention it, but I had forgotten all about it. No," he added with a scornful laugh, "I'm not jealous; I stand too well in that quarter to fear any rival." And his fingers began playing with the locket on his watch-guard.

Mr. Delabole had never removed his eyes from his companion during this little colloquy. At its conclusion he said:

"Well, whatever cause your dislike springs from, you must not let it influence your manner toward this young man. It was to his guardian, or godmother, or whoever the old woman is that he lives with, that Asprey was sent for during dinner. He told me so in the hall, and said that the old lady had had a very narrow squeak for it this time, and that unquestionably

her ticket is taken for the down line. When she starts on that journey, our young friend comes into all the money."

"And a nice use he'll make of it," sneered Philip Vane.

"A nice use *we* shall make of it, my dear Philip," said Mr. Delabole, with a light laugh. "For if I can carry out my idea, most of that worthy old person's savings will come to the Terra del Fuegos, or some of our other ventures. Therefore, as I was just saying, there is every reason why you should not permit the feelings with which you say you regard this young man to influence your manner towards him. He is by no means an idiot, as you suppose, and was quite sharp enough to perceive the unpleasant impression which he had created in you."

"All right," said Vane sullenly. "I'll take care of that. You never saw me blunder in business, and if this is put to me as a matter of business, I shall, of course, not import my private feelings into it. Now I think I'll go home."

"Stay one minute," said Mr. Delabole, who perceived that the effects of the drink had gone off; "I find I must get a few days' change of air, and there are two or three things which I want to say to you before I go."

"O! you are going at once, are you?" said Vane. "All right; as we cannot both be conveniently away at the same time, it will suit me better that you should go now than later."

"I'm glad of that," said Mr. Delabole.

"I didn't mean anything," said Vane, reddening at the sarcastic inflection of his friend's voice. "I'm not a swaggerer like young Hardinge. Only Mrs. Bendixen is going down next week to stop with some friends in the Isle of Wight, and I have an invitation to the same house. That's all."

"I shall be back by that time, and you shall go and do your courtship at your leisure, my dear Philip. By the way, when is the marriage to come off?"

"About the beginning of September, I suppose; that will be my first chance of a clear fortnight. She talks about a month, but I couldn't stand that."

"No, of course not. And where are you going to live?"

"There is a house of hers in Curzon-street, which will be vacant at Christmas, and upon which she seems to have set her mind. We shall stay at an hotel, I suppose, until the place is done up and re-furnished, and that kind of thing."

"Curzon-street will be handy for Hardinge, who lives close by. We must not, however, commence operations in that quarter until we see what is going to become of the old woman, who, by Asprey's account, is marvellously sharp, and might put the young fellow on his guard. Now let me talk to you about Irving's matter."

"Irving? O, the Indian man."

"Exactly, the Indian man! Gillman has been making some particular inquiries about Irving. It appears that he was a struggling man in Calcutta, junior partner in a merchant's house, adding very slowly to the capital which he had embarked in the

firm, and almost tempted to withdraw his money and return to England. One day a man came to him, bearing a letter of introduction from a common acquaintance, a Lieutenant in a native regiment, with a proposition for some wild speculation in indigo or cotton—I don't know which—which required capital to float it. This capital the visitor asked Irving to supply, pointing out to him at the same time fairly enough, that though the risk was very great, the profits, if successful, would be in proportion. Young Irving was almost at desperation point then, and after a little deliberation he agreed to find the money, and the speculation was launched. By this single *coup* Irving became a rich man, and then, as is nearly always the case, luck seemed to stick to him. But in a strange superstitious kind of way—he is a Scotchman—he always connected the young Lieutenant, who introduced the speculator to him, with his good luck, and took care to connect him with all the schemes in which he himself embarked in the future."

"Not a bad thing for the Lieutenant."

"A very good thing, for Irving looked upon him as a kind of guardian angel, and more than once refused to be mixed up with operations which his soldier-friend regarded suspiciously. Nor was it a bad thing for Irving, for the Lieutenant was naturally a keen, clear-headed fellow, and owed his advance in life much more to his own brains than to Irving's assistance."

"And are they both alive? and does the alliance still continue?"

"Yes, to both questions. They are both alive; but young Irving, who adventured his few hundreds, is

old Mr. Irving, of Combe Park, Surrey, and Marine Villa, Torquay, bank director, and one of the richest commoners in England. While the Lieutenant is Sir Geoffry Heriot, K.C.B., retired general officer."

"And you are telling me this story," said Philip, yawning, "*apropos* of—"

"*Apropos* of our getting Irving to join us in the direction of the Terra del Fuegos. Gillman seems convinced that it can only be managed with Sir Geoffry Heriot's sanction and concurrence."

"And how is that to be obtained?"

"By representing to Sir Geoffry himself the stability of the concern and the desirability of his taking shares in it."

"It is worth while throwing out a sprat for the sake of hooking such a fine salmon as this Mr. Irving. Why not tell Sir Geoffry that so many shares, now at such and such a premium, have been placed at his private disposal?"

"Simply because that would be the exact way to defeat our object! When I was a young man, many years ago, a friend told me a story which I have never forgotten. His father was a banker at Athens. At the principal hotel there arrived a Frenchman, a magnifico, a duke with an historical name. He lived splendidly; his retinue was most numerous; he gave superb entertainments. After he had been at the hotel about a month, he one day called upon my friend's father, asking if the firm would cash a bill, which he would draw on his bankers in Paris. My friend's father had heard of the duke's pomp and magnificence, had seen some of the outward signs of his luxury in the number and splendour of his servants. But in

business he was a cautious man. Why did not the duke bring an introduction to him from the French ambassador? The duke laughed scornfully. Was it likely that he, a descendant of Clovis, would condescend to enter into any relations with such *canaille* as an ambassador sent from the Republic then existing in France? The banker did not reply. He was just turning round to instruct his head-cashier to discount the bill at the current rate when the duke said: 'Give me twenty thousand piastres now, and I will give you my bill for twenty-five thousand payable in a fortnight.' In an instant the banker saw the style of man he had to deal with. In an instant he closed his desk, put the keys in his pocket, and saying, 'That is not our method of doing business,' bowed his visitor out. The next day the duke was arrested as a swindling impostor. Memo. Never offer too much, lest your motives be suspected."

"You're right," said Philip Vane, "and I can't conceive why I made the suggestion, except that I am dropping with sleep, and very weak-minded in consequence."

"I will release you in two minutes. All you have to do is this. During my absence you will receive a farther report from Gillman. If in it he says that Sir Geoffry Heriot's influence over Mr. Irving still continues, and that the old gentleman declines to move in our matter without consulting his friend, you must find out Sir Geoffry's address, and—"

"And let you know?"

"That will be impossible, dear boy, I shall be out of town."

"But you will leave your address?"

"Not exactly," said Mr. Delabole playfully. "I don't want to be worried with business matters while I'm away. Other people want a little quiet as well as you, Master Philip. No, what you have to do is to find out Sir Geoffry's address, and tell Gillman, whom, as far as regards that matter, I will place entirely at your disposal, to make himself acquainted with the old General's friends, mode of life, &c. He knows exactly what to do. Thus, all the preparation will be made and ready for me to work upon when I return to town."

"And if there is a necessity for seeing this old Sir What-you-call-him, who may live at the extremity of England, or on the Continent, or anywhere else, who will have to do that?"

"You, undoubtedly, my dear Philip. That appertains to the general manager's department, and I believe you receive the general manager's salary and perquisites."

"As at present arranged, certainly, but—but—however, we need not discuss the matter farther, just now. You may depend upon my doing all that is necessary. Now, good-night and good-bye."

"Stay, let me see you to the door; the lock is awkward for those unaccustomed to it."

So saying, Mr. Delabole followed his guest down the staircase, and saw him safely into the street.

Returning to his room, the luxurious proprietor mixed himself a little cold brandy-and-water, lit a final cigarette, and commenced to moralise.

"Wonderfully clever man of the world, Asprey! What he said of our dear friend, who has just vacated that chair, that he 'could not stand beans,' is exactly

and mathematically correct! Curzon-street and Mrs. Bendixen, and her sixty thousand pounds, have been too much for him! He means to kick over the traces, and he shows signs of it already. That was what he meant by his recent hesitation. When he has secured that prize, he thinks that he will be independent of me and of the Terra del Fuegos, and can hold or leave his position with us as it may happen to please him. Not so fast, Mr. Philip Vane, not quite so fast, if you please! There are such things as slips between cups and lips, and with those who have the opportunity of putting spokes in wheels rests the amount of progress to be achieved. Let me see what I can do in that capacity."

As he spoke he rose from his seat, flung the butt-end of his cigarette into the empty fireplace, and crossing the room, seated himself at a large old-fashioned writing-table. Opening one of the drawers, he took from it a memorandum-book, bound in leather, and secured with a lock. Opening this again with a gold key, hanging amidst a bunch of charms on his watch-chain, he turned over the leaves rapidly until he stopped at a certain page.

"There it is," he said, "my first and only essay in the detective profession, which, for an amateur, was decidedly successful. How wise I was not to trust to my memory for the detail, and how grateful I ought to be to old Wuff, that the casual reference to him and his travelling company, that morning at the club, should have been the means of giving me a tight hold over one of the most slippery but most useful tools ever yet fashioned for my hand! 'Miss Madge Pierrepont, leading lady, Wexeter Theatre, Dobson, manager.

Ultra-respectable, not a breath heard. Lodges with younger sister at Miss Cave's, box-book keeper in Crescent. Supposed to be spooned on by Gerald Hardinge, scene-painter at theatre. N.B. Nothing known of him, supposed to be swell out of luck. Tall woman, brown hair, large eyes, walks well.' Walks well! Lord, ah! I shall never forget the day that I walked after her and her sister from the theatre, when I wanted to take stock of her in the daylight, and how she looked me up and down when she found I was following them as though she were a princess! I didn't like that, I recollect; I found the detective lay wasn't in my line, and left the rest of the clearing of it up to Gillman. Here is his report. 'Miss Madge Pierrepont, leading lady at the Chepstow Theatre, manager, W. Mew. Extract from the visitors' book of the Chepstow Castle Hotel: Arrivals, May the 17th,—Mund, Esquire, Mrs. and Mast., London; Wugg, Major, Southsea; Crumpsall, Mrs., Manchester; Vane, Captain, London. Extract from marriage-register in Chepstow parish church: July the 3d. This is to certify, &c. Margaret Pierrepont, spinster; Philip Vane, bachelor. Witnesses, Thomas Black, fisherman; Helen Black, pew-opener.' That will do for my dear Philip, I think! That will prove a curb even for his restive temper. Not merely shall he do exactly what I require him, but through this 'information which I had received,' I shall be enabled to show him the best way of investing Mrs. Bendixen's sixty thousand pounds!"

END OF VOL. I.

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